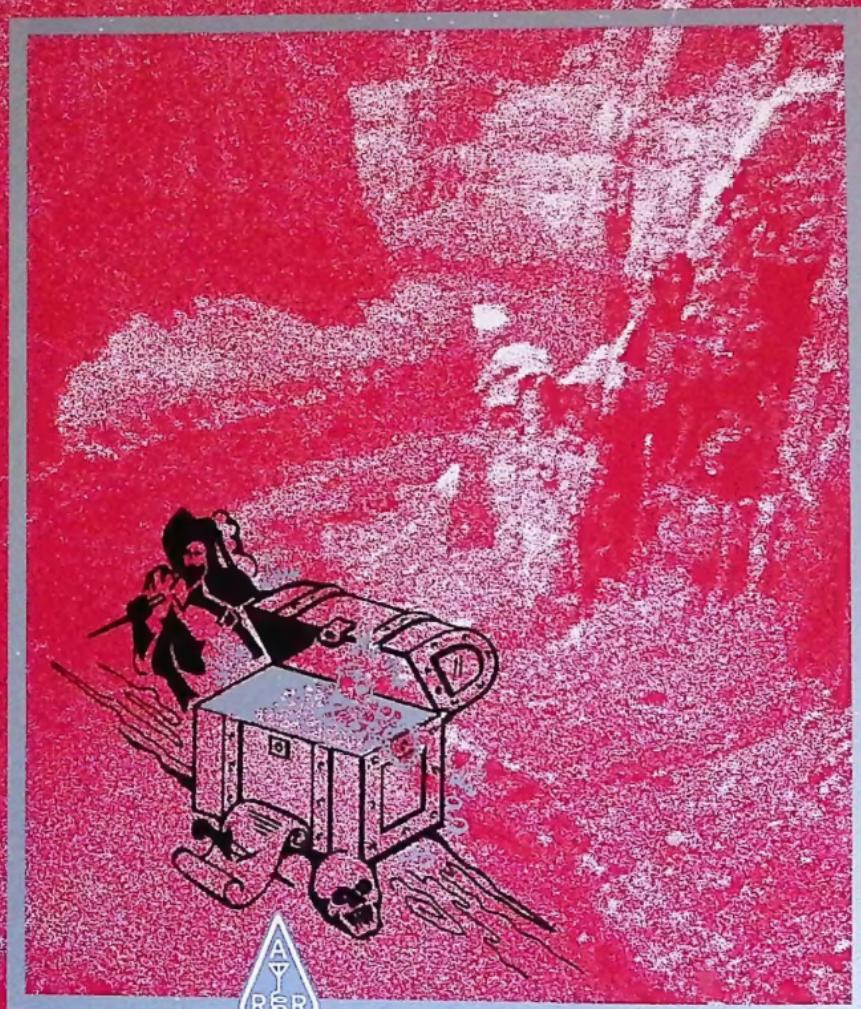


GRAND CANYON QSO



WALKER A. TOMPKINS

Grand Canyon QSO

By Walker A. Tompkins

American Radio Relay League
Newington, CT USA 06111



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CHAPTER ONE

A Message from Mexico

The moment he came in sight of his home at 2910 Mission View Road, Tommy Rockford sensed that something was wrong inside the house. He was at the end of a tiring 400-mile trip from Death Valley, driving the Santa Bonita Amateur Radio Club's ancient Volkswagen van, but his senses tingled with the premonition that danger in the form of a prowler might be awaiting him.

It was two o'clock in the morning. Had he really glimpsed a flicker of light such as a burglar might make behind the drawn window shades of his hamshack-bedroom above the double garage? Or might it have been a reflection of the approaching headlights of his own van? Or was he just brain-weary from driving practically non-stop across hundreds of miles of desert followed by Los Angeles smog and traffic, so that he was imagining things that weren't really there?

Nineteen-year-old Tommy had been away for a long weekend, taking part in the local ham club's annual Field Day exercises, testing shortwave radio communications under extreme emergency conditions. Death Valley National Monument along the California-Nevada border had been the unusual site of this year's FD operations.

Returning in the Santa Bonita club's van loaded with solar energy cells, antennas and other Field Day equipment, Tommy had made a detour after midnight to drop off his young rockhound friend, Chub Downey, in West Los Angeles.

Instead of spending the rest of the night suffocating in a Smogville motel, Tommy—known to radio hams around the world by his call sign of K6ATX—had elected to push on the extra hundred miles up the California coast to his home in Santa Bonita.

The feeling of alarm remained strong enough in Tommy Rockford to cause him to drive on past his own driveway and park at the curb. If there really was an intruder in his hamshack, it wouldn't be wise to forewarn him by driving up to the garage.

Climbing out of the dusty van and stretching his six-foot frame to loosen travel-weary muscles, K6ATX kept anxious eyes fixed on the double windows of the hamshack over the garage, watching for another flicker of light behind the drawn window shades.

What made it ominous was that no one was at home tonight. His father and mother were staying over a few days at Furnace Creek Ranch in Death Valley, where they had been summoned early Saturday by the grim news that their son Tommy had mysteriously disappeared while on the Field Day expedition. First rumors were that K6ATX had drowned in a flash flood. Actually, he was a prisoner of two outlaws who had been hiding in a desert canyon after committing a murder and armed robbery at a gambling casino in Las Vegas.

Tommy shivered, and not entirely because of the chill breeze sweeping in off the Pacific Ocean, or the fact that he was still dressed for 120 degree desert heat—Levis, Nike shoes, and a short-sleeved black football jersey bearing the orange block letter T of the California Institute of Technology, in Pasadena, where he had just concluded a very exciting freshman year. He was majoring in electronics engineering with a goal of joining NASA's space program after graduation.

The Rockfords lived in a modest Spanish-style home with white stucco walls, red tile roof, arched doorways and black wrought-iron grillwork serving as both ornamentation and security for all windows. It was located high on the Riviera ridge above the city, making it impossible for the light he thought he had seen behind his hamshack window to have been a reflection of the street lights and neon signs of Santa Bonita's business district.

Tommy headed toward the garage, its roof bristling with Tommy's various ham antennas, from a rotatable tribander array on a 40-foot tower to a small twin-fiver for two meters. His hamshack-bedroom certainly contained plenty of goodies to attract a burglar—not only his ham gear, but the Macintosh 512K personal computer he used at college, scuba diving paraphernalia, skis, a surfboard, assorted sports clothing—portable stuff any burglar could readily swap for cash with a fence who dealt in stolen goods, or at some sleazy pawnshop. Tommy

had never been able to afford adequate insurance coverage for his possessions.

A narrow, railed stairway led up the west wall of the garage to a platform fronting his hamshack's exterior door. Tommy's father had insisted on installing it as a fire escape—although in 10 years as a licensed Amateur Radio hobbyist, K6ATX had never had an electrical fire. Tonight, the fire escape stairs provided a way to reach the hamshack without going through the house.

Tommy reached into the Radio Club van and selected a heavy iron crowbar from the toolbox, for use as a weapon in case his instincts were right and he did surprise a prowler inside. His hiking shoes made no whisper of sound as he crossed the concrete driveway and crept stealthily up the stairs. He reached the railed platform facing the hamshack door, identified by a carved mahogany plaque with his K6ATX call sign over a red and gold logo of the American Radio Relay League, the national ham organization. He squatted on the doormat to squint through the keyhole—and every nerve and fiber of his being suddenly froze.

The tiny aperture afforded a tunnel-vision view of his room. To the left was the long bench carrying his transceivers, antenna couplers, power supplies, and other gear making up Amateur Radio station K6ATX. And seated in Tommy's own swivel chair, as if about to pick up the mike or reach for the electronic keyer paddles, was the menacing shape of a stranger, engrossed in reading from a sheet of paper by the glow of a tiny pen-cell flashlight, the beam shielded by cupped fingers which were encased in black gloves.

The flashlight probably illuminated the intruder's face, but Tommy's keyhole field of view cut off the figure at shoulders and knees. Now he had definite proof that he hadn't just imagined a stranger was in the house. What paper was he studying so intently? The only valuable papers in Tommy's hamshack were the framed trophies certifying to ham contests he had won, and ARRL certificates indicating he had Worked All States, All Continents, and the like—none of which had any value except to his ego.

Tommy Rockford was starting to rise when disaster struck. The heavy crowbar in his hand accidentally brushed a flower pot his mother kept on the platform railing behind him. Knocked off balance, the ceramic pot and the cymbidium orchid spikes it contained went plummeting down to shatter on the flagstone walk alongside the house,

with a crash that sounded in Tommy's horrified ears like the blast of a cannon.

From inside the hamshack came a startled cry, a muffled oath, followed by pounding feet—coming his way! Before Tommy had a chance to draw back from the door it slammed open in his face, bowling him backwards to ram his shoulders against the platform railing and knocking the crowbar out of his grasp.

In the dense shadow under an overhanging palm tree, the silhouetted prowler seemed hardly more than a blur in Tommy's vision. Even as the figure leaped for the top step, still clutching the mysterious sheet of paper in one gloved fist, K6ATX recovered his balance and flung himself in a football player's flying tackle to wrap his arms around his adversary's ankles.

Both men went somersaulting down the narrow stairway, Tommy's arms locked in a death-grip around his quarry's shins. They caromed off the garage wall with bone-bending force and plunged against the outside railing, which broke away in a shower of flying splinters.

The struggling pair crash-landed on a flat-topped Eugenia hedge bordering the walk below, a cushion that spared one or both of them from receiving a fractured skull on the flagstone pavement.

Momentarily dazed, Tommy Rockford was aware of losing his grip on the pair of thrashing legs. He snatched wildly at the fugitive's right arm and hung on desperately, only to have the shirt sleeve and black silk glove rip off in Tommy's grasp like a snake shedding its skin.

With a scream of pain the man regained his feet and streaked like a startled deer around the corner of the garage. He became a running shadow in the starlight, leaving a spattered trail of blood on the pavement, indicating that he had suffered an injury of some kind during their struggle on the stairs or their long fall.

Gasping for breath, Tommy raced in pursuit. He arrived at the curb of Mission View Road just as the fleeing prowler sprang into his parked getaway car. The motor roared into life. The car leaped into the lemon-yellow glare of a sodium vapor street light, rear wheels burning rubber and sending up a cloud of acrid smoke.

K6ATX recognized the vehicle as a silver-gray Mazda 626 sedan, with blue and yellow California plates. He had time to glimpse the numerals 943, but before he could read the three letters which completed a California license registration, the car disappeared with

a tire-squealing skid around the curve leading to Alameda Padre Serra, the main exit to downtown.

Sucking a deep breath into the pit of his lungs to clear his head, the effort sending a stab of pain across his bruised ribcage, K6ATX kept his eyes focused on the broad curving street where Alameda Padre Serra met the bottom of the hill and joined Mission Canyon Road in front of the twin-towered, two-century-old Spanish mission which was Santa Bonita's most famous historical landmark.

In the wee hours of this cold Monday morning, traffic was scanty on the streets of the sleeping city, so the head and taillights of the lone speeding car he saw had to be the one driven by the mysterious fugitive. Tommy watched in despair as it sped past the Old Mission and skidded right onto Garden Street, which would take the fugitive directly to the US 101 freeway. There, on-ramps would offer him a choice of escape routes—south a hundred miles to Los Angeles, or north 350 miles to San Francisco.

Trembling with aftershock, K6ATX made his way back to the fire escape stairs, following the trail of blood. He stooped to pick up the intruder's ripped-off shirt sleeve and glove, to show the police later. The torn sleeve, Tommy was revolted to discover, was soaked with warm blood from armpit to cuff from some kind of cut.

With the glove was the twisted scrap of paper the thief had been reading. Back on the upper landing, K6ATX almost tripped on the crowbar he had dropped an instant before he had tackled the escaping prowler. He realized now he was lucky not to have taken a point-blank bullet from a gun the burglar might very well have been carrying. He was deeply grateful his Dad and Mom had been spared the trauma of this violation of the sanctity of their home.

Entering his beloved hamshack, K6ATX experienced a sense of security, of being home. Every piece of high-tech equipment in this room had been paid for by Tommy himself from wages earned after school and summers, most recently as a clerk at Val Shannon's Radio Supply store.

Bucking a current trend among radio hams, Tommy's station was mostly home-built rather than store-bought. Assembling kits or building a rig from scratch was half the fun of hamming; anyone could plunk down his money at a radio store and take home a fancy commercial factory-built outfit, like most CBers do.

Tommy switched on a ceiling light and went straight to the

telephone on his bedside stand. He dialed a call to the watch commander on duty at the Santa Bonita central police station. When he had finished describing the incident—just another notation to add to other crimes on the police blotter tonight, no doubt—Tommy said, “I haven’t had time to see if he took anything, but I think he left empty-handed.”

“Roger, Tommy,” the watch commander answered. “You’re lucky you didn’t get stabbed or shot. I’ll alert the CHP to keep an eye out for the suspect’s vehicle speeding either north or south on the 101 freeway. Be careful not to touch anything until we can dust for fingerprints, although the silk gloves indicate he was probably a pro. There are no squad cars in your neighborhood right now, but I’ll have an officer at your address as soon as possible.”

K6ATX cradled the telephone and looked around the room. The only thing that seemed out of the normal was his accumulated mail, which his mother always stacked neatly on his radio bench whenever he was away. The burglar had apparently flung his mail onto the floor, for a dozen or so envelopes, advertising fliers and ham QSL cards lay scattered about the carpet. Only one envelope had been ripped open. It lay on the desk in front of Tommy’s Heathkit-5400 transceiver—reminding Tommy again that the prowler had been reading a letter by flashlight when he was discovered.

K6ATX picked up the torn-open envelope. He was not surprised to see that it carried a foreign stamp and postmark—Mexico City. Probably some radio amateur south of the border, enclosing his radio QSL card to confirm a QSO, or two-way contact, with a fellow ham in the States.

The envelope was empty. But of course—the letter it contained was the one the burglar had been interrupted in the act of reading! Tommy was still holding the black glove and the letter he had jerked from the burglar’s hand. It carried a message in single-spaced typewriting, written on the crested stationery of the Grande Hotel Royale, Ciudad de Mejico, D.F., and was dated Tuesday, June 17, two days before Tommy had left for Death Valley.

His head swimming from lack of sleep plus miscellaneous cuts and contusions received in his brief scuffle with the prowler on the fire escape, Tommy smoothed out the crumpled sheet, placed it under the glow of his desk lamp, and began reading:

My esteemed amigo Tomas:

I am about to embark on the most important archeological expedition of my career and time is running very short. This secret expedition is being financed by the National Museum of Aztec Studies and the Mexican government, and will take place in the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, Arizona. I will be in charge.

The purpose of the expedition is scientific, but I cannot put in writing its precise nature. I am enabled to hire a skilled communications (radio) assistant whom I can entrust with a state secret of the UTMOST importance. I want you to be that radio man because of your technical qualifications, but also because I am forever in your debt for saving my life at the risk of your own, last year during our adventure on San Miguel Island.

I am flying (incognito) to Flagstaff, Arizona, on June 21 to make arrangements. I want you to telephone me as soon as possible in care of the Americana Motel in Flagstaff. Please use my assumed name of "Senor Aaron Velarde." Please mention this to NO ONE except your parents, but swear them to secrecy, as I have STRONG reason to believe that my own personal safety might be in jeopardy if the wrong people learned of this confidential mission. I urgently request you to go on this expedition with me! Pls BURN THIS LETTER IMMEDIATELY! Vaya con Dios!!

73, Dr. Antonio Bonilla, EA7WK

Tommy Rockford's heart was thumping his sore ribs by the time he finished reading. Dr. Bonilla was an internationally famous archeologist and curator of the Museum of the Indies in far-off Seville, Spain. Thanks to many DX ham radio contacts in recent years, he and Tommy had become close friends. The last communication K6ATX had had with EA7WK was a letter mailed from Spain more than six weeks ago, while Tommy was busy cramming for his final exams at Cal Tech.

In that letter, Dr. Bonilla had said he was being loaned to Mexico by the Spanish government, to assist the Mexican authorities in "a vitally important scientific project." During the disastrous 1985 earthquake that devastated Mexico City, the Museum for Aztec Studies had collapsed. While the debris was being cleared, a number of priceless old untranslated Spanish documents had been exhumed from forgotten storage boxes.

Most of these parchments, Dr. Bonilla said, dated from the time of Cortez's Conquest of Mexico in the 16th Century, and were written

in what scholars term "archaic Spanish," including a form of padres' shorthand which was unintelligible to most living scholars. The principal authority in this field of translation today was Dr. Bonilla, whom Tommy knew as Amateur Radio operator EA7WK. The two hams had already shared high adventure a year ago, involving a search for the long-lost grave of Portuguese explorer Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, the discoverer of California, and a Manila galleon reportedly wrecked in the 1500s at San Miguel Island, off California's Point Concepcion.*

And now, another perilous adventure was about to bring EA7WK and K6ATX together again.

###

While waiting for the police to arrive, Tommy reconnoitered both floors of the house and found where the intruder had made his entry. Mr. and Mrs. Rockford, in their haste to depart for Death Valley on Saturday, had neglected to secure a downstairs sliding glass door which gave access to the hot tub and jacuzzi on the backyard sundeck. This was not a break-and-enter burglary; the intruder had simply walked into the house, leaving the sliding door open behind him.

An SBPD prowl car with red roof light blinking arrived at 3:15 AM. A pair of uniformed patrolmen came in, asked their questions, put the black silk glove and bloody sleeve in a glassine bag for evidence, dusted unsuccessfully for fingerprints, and left just as the Westminster chimes on the *News-Star* tower downtown marked 4 AM.

Nervously drained though he was by his rigorous weekend in Death Valley and the long journey home, K6ATX found it difficult to get to sleep after he hit the sack. The fact that the intruder had seemed more interested in reading Doc Bonilla's letter than in ransacking the house for valuables hinted that he had entered the Rockford residence for the specific purpose of intercepting an urgent message Bonilla had intended for Tommy's eyes alone.

Dr. Bonilla, as Tommy well knew, was not a nervous man who might buckle under fire. He had indicated that if the secret mission hinted at in his letter ever became known to the wrong persons, his

*See DX BRINGS DANGER, published 1985 by ARRL.

life would be placed in jeopardy. But could that dangerous information have led some criminal 1,700 miles northwest of Mexico City, to the Rockford home in Santa Bonita, California—on one of the rare occasions when the entire Rockford family was out of town at the same time?

How could the intruder have known that Dr. Bonilla had sent a letter to the Rockford home in the first place? And was there any sensitive information in the letter which could endanger Dr. Bonilla if it fell into the hands of a criminal? Only the writer would know.

In the morning—and daybreak was already staining the horizon—he might clear up the mystery. The first thing he would do would be to call Dr. Bonilla in Flagstaff and hope to get some answers to a few bewildering questions.

With two more weeks of vacation time available before returning to his summer job at the radio-TV supply store to help earn his college tuition, K6ATX knew one thing for certain. He was going to keep a rendezvous with Dr. Bonilla in Arizona.

Ten years ago—the summer he had become one of the youngest licensed ham radio operators in California—Tommy and his Dad had made that exciting raft trip through the Grand Canyon. And as a 9-year-old, Tommy Rockford had sworn that someday he would return to the Colorado River for a replay of the thrill of his life.

CHAPTER TWO

Rendezvous in Arizona

The discordant jangling of a telephone rescued Tommy Rockford from the toils of a nightmare in which he was about to get his throat slashed by a black-gloved night prowler out on the hamshack fire escape.

As he was groping for the phone he noticed the time on the digital clock at his bedside: ten minutes past 12 noon! That brought him as wide awake as a dash of ice water in the face. He had slept the entire morning—and he had promised to be up by nine o'clock to keep a CW sked on 40 meters with his Uncle JC Ellison, W7OE, in Seattle!

The crisp voice in the earpiece identified itself as the day shift watch commander at the Figueroa Street Police Station.

“Good morning, sir. A follow-up report on your hot prowl at 0200 hours this date. We’ve located a silver-gray, four-door Mazda 626 sedan, California license plates 943-XIG, parked in the short-term lot at the airport in Goleta, believed to be your suspect’s getaway vehicle. A Hertz rental, picked up at 1030 hours yesterday at the airport, returned sometime before daylight this morning. The driver probably caught either the 6:30 AM United milk run to LAX—or their 7:10 commuter flight to San Francisco International. He forfeited his rental deposit.”

“What name did the driver give the car rental agency?”

“Jay Holsopple. And a fictitious address in Beverly Hills.”

“No one by that name booked a flight on either of the early planes, obviously.”

“No such name on either the LA or the Frisco passenger list, no sir. But we believe he’s your suspect. He apparently lost considerable

blood, as the upholstery was heavily stained. We checked the ER at Goleta Valley Community Hospital and the all-night emergency clinics in the area, but no one appeared to get a cut sewed up. The suspect also discarded a black woman's silk glove, left hand, which matches the right-hand glove you gave Sergeant Ryan Hinn this morning."

"How do you know the woman was black? Just kidding. But I wasn't wrestling with a female last night, that's for sure."

"Label shows the gloves were purchased in a Goleta shop near the airport, for whatever that's worth. We'll check the shop this morning." The desk sergeant coughed. "About the woman, I'm just quoting what Officer Hinn wrote here on the report. 'Black woman's silk glove,' he says. Better make that read 'a woman's black silk glove,' I guess. Okay?"

Tommy chuckled. "Okay. Thanks for calling, sergeant. Keep me posted, will you please? So long."

K6ATX was down in the kitchen brewing coffee, scrambling eggs and frying bacon and potatoes for brunch when two ham buddies, W6AMD, Roy, and WA6IBR, Spud, arrived to pick up the Ham Club van.

Much as he wanted to ragchew about the recent Field Day adventure they had just shared, Tommy hustled the guys on their way. Uppermost in his mind right now was calling Flagstaff and talking with Doc Bonilla. He would decide when the time came whether it would be advisable to let EA7WK know about last night's ominous visitor to his hamshack, and the fact that the unknown intruder had read at least part of Dr. Bonilla's letter to him.

Tommy was back in his hamshack, about to place a call to one "Senor Aaron Velarde, Americana Motel, Flagstaff, Arizona," when his phone rang again. One of his closest friends was on the line, Ross Jackson, the Sheriff of Santa Barbara County.

"You sure made the headlines in the *LA Times* and our *News-Star*, Tommy!" Jackson greeted him. "First you were reported drowned in a flash flood, then the CBS TV news on Channel Two showed you being airlifted by helicopter from some kind of escapade near Telescope Peak. We're sure glad you're home. How did you radio hams do on Field Day?"

"Considering that we were operating from the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere, not bad. We logged two EME contacts, earth-moon-earth, and several satellite QSOs. And we operated on

emergency solar power exclusively, which should fatten our point score. We'll have to wait for *QST*'s listings to know how the three other Santa Barbara County ham clubs scored."

"What's the scoop on you tangling with the Las Vegas 'Crossbow Killers'?* All we know is what we saw on television yesterday."

Tommy groaned to himself. "Ross, old pal, it's a long story, but right now, I've got an emergency call to make on the land line—would you let me get back to you later?"

Ross Jackson's friendly laugh was reassuring. "Roger, no problem. Before you hang up—can you have dinner with us tonight? Around seven? I know you're batchin' it, and you're a lousy cook."

"Sure can! I'll swap you my Death Valley story for chow."

After signing off with Sheriff Jackson, Tommy rang his father's downtown business office, the Channel Cities Travel Agency, and arranged connecting air flights to Flagstaff via Los Angeles and Phoenix. By the time his computerized reservations were confirmed it was past two o'clock. He was still groggy for sleep.

It was 2:15 PM when he established communication with the PBX operator on duty at the Americana Motel in Flagstaff. A friendly nasal voice reassured him, "Mr. Velarde is registered in Room 216, sir. I don't see his key in the box, so he must be in. I'm ringing him now—Mr. Velarde? Long distance call for y'all, sir."

Tommy Rockford felt himself relax at the first sound of the rich baritone voice he had heard so often from EA7WK when they were working each other DX on 10 meter phone. Except this time, Antonio Bonilla, the world-famous authority on Spanish history, concealed his ID under a false name.

"This is King Six Always Takes X-lax in Santa Bonita, Señor Velarde! I've been out of town for Field Day, which is why I'm so tardy answering your letter about the Grand Canyon junket. *Como esta, amigo?* Or in Inglés, what's cookin', caballero?"

"Caramba, it gives me great joy to hear your voice, Tomás!" Bonilla cleared his throat and continued in a half-whisper, "May I request that you abide by my warning to, uh, be discreet in discussing our business proposition? Telephones, like walls, often have hostile ears, *no es verdad?*"

*See DEATH VALLEY QTH, published by ARRL, 1985.

Well, one question had been answered, but quick: he dared not discuss with Dr. Bonilla his sinister news about a prowler intercepting his mail last night, assuming that phase of the burglary was related to Bonilla's announcing his super-secret scientific expedition to the Grand Canyon. That would have to wait for an eyeball QSO when they met in Flagstaff tomorrow.

"Comprendo, Señor Velarde. I'll BCNU mañana."

"You're joining me, then?... *Muy bien!* It is essential we talk face to face. The, ah, journey I referred to is scheduled to start early Wednesday morning June 26 from Lee's Ferry on the upper Colorado River below Glen Canyon Dam. Those who are participating will be briefed in Flagstaff at 1300 hours tomorrow. And remember, *hijo mio*, I would not be asking you to assist me if I thought the project posed any physical danger to you. You are my radio communications assistant, nothing more. If there is any personal risk, it involves me alone... When can I expect you, Tomás?"

"I've booked Western Sky Flight 316 out of Phoenix. ETA at the Flagstaff airport is 1104 hours. I can hardly wait to see your ugly mug again, Doc!"

"Mismo tambien! Our mission should take only a week or 10 days to accomplish, Tomás. Most of our radio work will be on CB because of its freedom from licensing problems, but please bring along your two-meter transceiver with suitable battery packs—no recharging available on the river trip. And rain gear: this is the shower season in northern Arizona, I am told. Everything else can be procured here... and the Mexican government will reimburse you for all expenses. I do not wish to alarm you, amigo, but the less we say on the telephone, the better. *Sabe usted?* It is a personal matter pertaining to my safety."

"I savvy you a solid five-by-nine, Señor. I'll go QRT as soon as you give me the address of your motel."

"The Americana's at 2650 East Santa Fe Blvd.—but wait! I am meeting you at the Flagstaff airport. 11:04 flight from Phoenix, *si?* You will not regret this, Tomás. It will make our San Miguel adventure seem as dull as one of my ancient history textbooks!"

"Can't wait, *por seguro!* *Adios, amigo.*" Having pretty well exhausted his vocabulary of high school Spanish, K6ATX hung up. "Here I've committed myself to the unknown," he muttered aloud, "and before I even pack my toothbrush, I'm knee-deep in a mystery."

Following breakfast, K6ATX returned to his hamshack to tidy up the mess left by his nocturnal guest and to look over his mail. Then he fired up his Fat Mac computer, clocked Note Pad from the desk menu, and following a daily ritual he had established at college, typed off the day's urgent tasks:

(1) Notify the kennel that Spiffy will be extending his stay until the folks get back from Death Valley. (2) Arrange for Spud or somebody to run me out to the airport for the 30-minute flight to LAX. (3) Pick up airplane tickets at Dad's office. (4) Buy fresh batteries for the two-meter rig. (5) Phone Dad and Mom and explain about Grand Canyon trip. (6) Freebie dinner at Ross Jackson's tonight. (7) Hit the sack early!

###

Tommy Rockford never tired of seeing Arizona from a plane, although he felt aerial views did not do the Grand Canyon justice. From 35,000 feet it lost its true grandeur and awesome majesty and became just a twisting, miniaturized, shadow-filled ditch. But approaching Flagstaff in Western Sky's noisy turboprop feeder plane, he reveled in the sight of the towering San Francisco Peaks looming north of the city—Arizona's highest—with the Grand Canyon of the Colorado a pink-and-purple streak on the horizon 50 miles to the north. The ponderosa pine forests of the high Coconino Plateau were in stark contrast to the cactus-dotted deserts around Phoenix; even the most jaded air traveler could not help but be stirred by the scenery around the old frontier town of Flagstaff.

Now on this hot June morning, Tommy's plane was starting its landing approach by circling over the crosshatched streets of the community which got its name from a pine tree that had been stripped of its limbs and used as a flagstaff to fly the Stars and Stripes on the Fourth of July 1876, in celebration of the nation's 100th birthday.

Waiting at the passengers' gate of the little air strip terminal south of town was the welcome figure of Dr. Antonio Bonilla, one of Spain's most distinguished citizens. As a hobbyist, "Doc" had the distinction of being the first radio ham in Europe to bounce a single-sideband signal off the moon. His was a face which could not be disguised as easily as his name: an onion-bald pate, a flesh-colored plastic patch to conceal an eyeball lost to a Nazi bullet while fighting with the British army at Tobruk in World War II, his dark mustache and pointed Van

Dyke beard giving him the aristocratic look of a Spanish cavalier in a Velazquez canvas. In his mid-60s but looking closer to 40, Dr. Bonilla presented a macho picture of rawhide-lean, bronzed, good health.

Their rented car was tailgated out of the airport by a similar vehicle occupied by two swarthy-faced men. "My bodyguards, courtesy the Mexican government," Dr. Bonilla grumbled. "They are security police hired by the Museum of Aztec Studies, ostensibly to protect me from harm. More likely, to make sure I don't pilfer anything when we uncover the treasure we're going after—which I will be telling you about. I won't be able to introduce them to you by name—utterly unpronounceable strings of consonants with no vowels I can discern. So I call them 'Castor and Pollux.' The Gemini stick to me closer than tattoos, worse than Secret Service agents. May they fall overboard and drown! I am sick of the sight of them. At least I made them rent a separate car this morning. What I have to tell you is confidential, much of it. It concerns Aztec gold. Does that excite you?"

Doc Bonilla spoke English with a rich Hispanic accent which K6ATX and fellow DX hounds all over the globe found charming.

Not until they were on Highway US 17 driving north on the 10-mile trip into downtown Flagstaff did Tommy Rockford's curiosity finally get the better of him.

"Doc, I've got a string of questions I have to get answered or you're going to see me explode! For openers, what's this Grand Canyon trip all about? I don't even know if it's a mule ride down Bright Angel Trail—God forbid!—or if we'll be running the rapids in a rubber raft! And what's this treasure you're talking about, Aztec gold or whatever? And why do you need bodyguards? You look tough enough to swim the wildest river or climb the highest peak!"

CHAPTER THREE

A Legend of Aztec Gold

Bonilla smiled, but the mirth did not reach his obsidian-dark eye. "I will give it to you, as you Anglos say, in a nutshell. When the big earthquake struck Mexico City in '85, as I told you in my letter, the Museum for Aztec Studies was badly damaged. During the cleaning up of the rubble, a number of hitherto unknown manuscripts, dating from the Conquest of Mexico by the *conquistadores* under Cortez and Coronado, came to light for the first time in centuries.

"One of the parchment scrolls was found quite accidentally, rolled up inside the hollow bone handle of an Aztec dagger. It was the diary of a Majorcan friar, Primotivo Salazar, who accompanied Vasquez de Coronado on an exploring expedition north and west of the Rio Grande in 1540. Their objective was the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola, reputed to have streets paved with gold. A hoax, of course, but a hoax that was to change the course of history.

"The friar's parchment, which incidentally I am carrying on my person at this moment, told how the Spaniards looted an Indian temple of a fabulous fortune in Toltec and Aztec gold and silver ornaments. A high priest of the Sun God cult, known in Mexican mythology as Ozar the Aztec, led a band of angry warriors in pursuit of the looters, vowing to recover their sacred objects. In the vicinity of what we now know as Bryce Canyon National Park in southern Utah, the Indians overtook Coronado's men and a battle ensued.

"Six selected *conquistadores*, led by a Capitan Juan Vicente Ventura and accompanied by Friar Salazar, fled southward, the gold in four leather *alforjas*, or saddlebags, carried by four mules. They

probably followed the Paria River south, until it emptied into the mighty Colorado River. Friar Salazar called it the Rio Sangre, the River of Blood, from its red coloration.

"With the Indians about to overtake them, the Spaniards lashed their saddlebags of gold and their food and water packs onto a makeshift raft made of driftlogs. They hoped the four swimming mules could tow them across the broad river. But the mules drowned. Capitan Ventura, Friar Salazar, the six soldiers and their Aztec gold were caught in the grip of the current and swept downstream into the deepest canyon any man had ever seen."

"The Grand Canyon of the Colorado!" Tommy exclaimed.

"*Si*, without question... For 18 hours they were swept down the river between mile-high cliffs with no way of landing. Finally, their raft was flung ashore below what the friar described as 'the mightiest rapid in all Christendom.'

"The Aztec treasure was too heavy to manage, so they decided to hide it until Coronado could come back later with a stronger force of soldiers. An Anasazi woman led them to a cave which the local Indians shunned because they thought it was haunted by evil spirits. The entrance was concealed behind a waterfall at the dead end of what Friar Salazar named *El Arroyo del Sumidero*, or Quicksand Gulch, somewhere downstream from the big rapid. They buried the four bags of gold at the dead end of this cave, but three avaricious mutineers among the six soldiers quarreled among themselves, unwilling to trust each other with the secret of such a treasure. A sword fight ensued inside the cave between the mutineers and the three soldiers loyal to Capitan Ventura. All six were killed. El Capitan Ventura was mortally wounded and with his dying breath pronounced a curse on anyone who might attempt to steal the treasure—a curse, I must challenge. Only Friar Salazar escaped the carnage which occurred in that ill-starred cave.

"In describing the event, Friar Salazar said that he carried out Capitan Ventura's dying request to prop him in a seated position by a ledge of stone near the cached gold. So at that the moment he breathed his last, he was looking down on the corpses of his men which littered the floor of the cave. Having a flare for the melodramatic, Friar Salazar named the place *La Cueva de los Amazonas*, the Cave of Skeletons, knowing that the next time humans laid eyes on the cave the dead men would have been reduced to bones. Capitan Ventura

and the six skeletons are still waiting.”

“Wow! What a creepy story, Doc! Whatever became of the Friar?”

“A sad ending to his saga, Tomás. After months of hardship, Friar Salazar somehow made it back to Mexico. There he recorded his ordeal on parchment in 1542, the year that Cabrillo discovered California. The Viceroy invited the old priest to present his parchment in person to the King’s court in Madrid—but he was waylaid by Aztecs near Orizaba, while on his way to board ship at Vera Cruz to set sail for Spain.

“No one knew what became of the parchment until it turned up hidden in the handle of a broken Aztec sacrificial dagger which had been stored in a museum basement. No one knows how it got there. The dagger’s existence wasn’t even known until the terrible earthquake of September 1985 brought it to light. The parchment gives detailed instructions on how to locate landmarks in the Grand Canyon which would lead to that cache of Aztec gold. It is my responsibility to return that gold to Mexico.”

Tommy Rockford felt his pulses pounding with excitement. “And you are the only translator in the world who can decipher how to find Captain Ventura and his Cave of Skeletons?”

“*Si.* And what a dire responsibility that knowledge is, Tomás!”

Tommy said dubiously, “But will descriptions written 400 years ago be of any use today? Even Grand Canyon landmarks could change in four centuries!”

Dr. Bonilla smiled. “We will find the answer to that question on this expedition, Tomás. Salazar’s directions were written in archaic Spanish, which I was called over from Spain in April to decipher. The Mexican government, knowing the gold, if recovered, would be worth millions for its intrinsic value alone, has commissioned me to go down the Grand Canyon and locate it, although it has been hidden from human eyes for more than four centuries. Arizona will share 20-80 with Mexico under the terms of international law regulating treasure trove, of course.

“For my services, I will be allowed to take Fr. Salazar’s precious scroll, a unique historical relic beyond price, back to my museum in Seville. That will be reward indeed, knowing I am carrying out the last wishes of a martyred monk. If we fail, the scroll goes back to Mexico. If we succeed, we will also rewrite the history books, which

say that Coronado ordered three Spanish soldiers to explore the Grand Canyon with a Hopi guide. They were unable to reach the river. If we find Ozar's gold, it will prove that my countrymen, not Americans, were the first white men to explore the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Such proof would please our national pride—and belatedly atone for an injustice committed against the Aztecs many generations ago."

"You said your life might be in jeopardy?" Tommy prompted.

"That is true—but my danger is not related to this treasure-hunting mission per se... No—I have reason to fear that a personal enemy, perhaps the most dangerous man in all of Europe, while he cannot know the true reason for my Grand Canyon mission, may be on my trail nonetheless, intending to assassinate me."

"Who is this bad *hombre*, Doc? Why should anyone want to murder a sweet old guy like you—if you don't mind my flattery?"

Bonilla answered after a thoughtful pause: "Have you ever heard of two international art thieves known to your FBI, Interpol and Scotland Yard as the 'Museum Bandits'—the Hollister Brothers, Earl and Duke, of Torquay, Devonshire, England?"

"I sure have!" Tommy exclaimed. "Aren't they the crooks who actually stole the *Mona Lisa* out of the Louvre Museum in Paris a few years ago—and returned it after collecting a fat ransom? That was made into a suspense movie for television by CBS—*The Da Vinci Caper*. I even made a copy on videotape for playback on Dad's VCR! Weren't the Hollisters titled noblemen or something, playing at crime because they got so bored with palace life?"

Dr. Bonilla nodded. "They are the decadent sons of the 5th Earl of Hollister, whose palace at Torquay on the English Channel is now a tourist attraction second only to Churchill's Blenheim.

"You see," Dr. Bonilla went on, warming to his subject, "the Hollister brothers, while of noble lineage, are extremely superstitious men. They live by the zodiac—their horoscopes! They believe in ghosts and fortune tellers, and in communicating with the dead by means of charlatans who call themselves spirit mediums. Such nonsense is ridiculous for men who graduated from Oxford!"

"Then, some 20 years ago, according to their own story, they were visited at Hollister Palace by the ghost of a long-dead ancestor who claimed that the *Mona Lisa*, or *La Gioconda* as Leonardo da Vinci had originally named his masterpiece, had originally belonged to the English House of Hollister. The 'ghost' told Earl and Duke that they

would be condemned to eternal torture in the next world if in their lifetimes they did not get the *Mona Lisa* back in the family's possession, ransom it to the highest bidder, and use the proceeds to restore their palace to its former glory.

"You know what happened next. The two brothers decided to do the impossible: steal the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre! And incredibly, they succeeded, thanks to bribing museum guards, as related in your TV movie. However, proving how stupid they actually are, the pair also left their fingerprints at the scene of the crime—and were thus revealed as the Earl of Hollister's heirs!

"What a scandal! But instead of surrendering and serving some time in prison or more likely being put on probation considering how influential their father was—they chose to follow a career of robbing high-security museums. The news media on the Continent dubbed them the Museum Bandits. Over the past 10 years, they succeeded in stealing art objects from the major museums in Berlin, Paris, Rome, Vienna. Their mode of operation was to bribe museum security officers into turning off burglar alarms, and the like."

Tommy asked, "And what does this have to do with *your* life being in danger, Doc?"

"As I said, the Hollisters specialize in museum robberies. Holding Old Masters for ransom—robberies which are rarely if ever reported by the press. Last year, they attempted to steal a priceless *Madonna* by El Greco and a contemporary masterpiece of Dali's from my museum in Seville. It was their last robbery."

"Yes—they were captured in the act, the papers said."

"*Si.* I happened to be working late in my laboratory when I heard gunfire. Our night watchman was shot and killed by Earl Hollister, the older brother. I was responsible for his capture and conviction. Unfortunately, his younger brother Duke, a man now in his 50s, escaped from custody before the trial. Earl is now serving a life sentence in a maximum-security prison in Madrid. Brother Duke has let me know, both by letter and by telephone, that he has sworn an oath to get revenge. In his words, one day before this year is out, as surely as the sun rises and sets, he will slay me without warning and without mercy. He is noted as a big-game hunter, so I presume he will assassinate me from ambush, using an elephant gun with a telescopic sight. I am resigned to it."

"Don't say that, Doc! Duke Hollister surely wouldn't trail you

a third of the way around the world, from Spain to Arizona."

Bonilla seemed preoccupied with threading through traffic as they entered downtown Flagstaff. "Jet travel has shrunk our world to the size of a moth ball, Tomás. I *thought* I was safe enough in Mexico, yes. Then one day two weeks ago, I was walking along Avenida Cinco de Mayo from the Plaza Mayor to the museum where I was about to wind up my translation assignments, when I almost ran into Duke Hollister—in the flesh! He was peering into a shop window—an art shop, significantly!—but he didn't see me—I hope. Before I could find a policeman, he had vanished. But I am sure he was in Mexico City to track me down. Why else? I do not believe it was a coincidence. The Duke's usual territory is the Continent."

At a traffic light Bonilla took out his wallet and drew from it a passport-sized photograph, which he handed to Tommy. It carried the serial number of Interpol, the international police organization. It showed a narrow-faced man in his late 50s with an aristocratic square-cut red beard, close-set ice-blue eyes, prominent cheekbones and a thick-corded neck. On the reverse side was the name *Duke Hollister* and a notation under the rubber-stamped words "Other identifying marks": *Blue tattoo of a reptile coiled around left wrist.*

"Mean-looking devil, all right," Tommy commented. He passed the picture back for Dr. Bonilla to stow in his wallet. "But Hollister *didn't* see you, he *didn't* track you down! He knows nothing of your coming to Arizona incognito!"

Dr. Bonilla shuddered before continuing his narrative:

"I pray to Señor Dios that he does not... Getting back to the subject at hand, only two expedition members besides myself know that Aztec gold is our real object. The others—my raft crew, my nuisance bodyguards Castor and Pollux—they think we are merely searching for routine Indian relics from the extinct Anasazi race like baskets and arrowheads, mortars and pestles.

"The first one I have confided in is my friend and colleague, Dr. Elwood Sixto, the director of the Arizona State Bureau of Antiquities, who found out only this morning. I had no choice but to tell him—his official presence as a consultant and observer is required by the Department of the Interior, who have jurisdiction over Grand Canyon National Park. Ah, here is our motel—I almost drove past it, I'm chattering so incessantly."

As Bonilla and his tailgating bodyguards turned in under the white

stucco entrance arch of the Americana Motel, Tommy inquired, "It's none of my business, Doc, but who is the second man you told? Or is that classified information?"

Dr. Bonilla chuckled, "Not to you it isn't. In Spain we call him Kilo Seis Alhambra Toledo Xilofono. His name? Tomás Rockford."

They pulled up in a parking slot numbered 234. Bonilla handed Tommy his room key, stamped with the same number.

"Go upstairs and freshen up," Bonilla said, "and I'll call for you at 12 sharp so we can go to lunch. I promise not to talk your ear off while we dine."

"Doc," Tommy said in a heavy voice, "I've been putting off telling you some—some news. Maybe it's unimportant. Maybe it's bad news, I don't know, but it concerns that letter you mailed me from Mexico City, inviting me to go on this expedition. Doc, my home QTH was burglarized night before last—"

CHAPTER FOUR

Top-Secret Briefing

Relaxing in the motel room Dr. Bonilla had reserved for him, Tommy Rockford wondered whether he had made a mistake in telling his host about the prowler's visit to his home in Santa Bonita yesterday. Had it done more harm than good?

Driving in from the airport this morning, his Spanish host had been as happy as a child, giving K6ATX a summary of what the secret expedition was all about. But when he learned that an unknown criminal had read the letter he had sent to Tommy from Mexico City, Dr. Bonilla seemed greatly disturbed.

"I cannot remember exactly what I wrote you, but the fact that I referred to our Grand Canyon expedition at all, and stressed the fact that it was top secret, was damaging enough," Dr. Bonilla had replied. "I was inexcusably careless in phrasing that letter. The fact that the burglar's black gloves were purchased near Santa Bonita, and that he abandoned his rental car at your local airport and made good his escape—that rules out mere idle snooping on the part of some random neighborhood burglar."

"Do you have any idea who it might have been?" Tommy had asked.

"Not really. But there is the very real possibility the burglar was Duke Hollister himself. If his daily horoscope gave him the go-ahead signal, Hollister would go anywhere and do anything."

"But why would *he* be interested in your mail—it doesn't make sense, Doc! You're letting your imagination run away with you."

"I am daring to suggest, Tomás, that Duke Hollister may now be interested in highjacking our Aztec objects d'art, which would be

far more valuable even than the *Mona Lisa* or any of the other fantastically valuable art he and his brother have stolen in the past. After all, if we locate this cache in the Grand Canyon, it will rank equally in art circles with the treasures found in 1923 in King Tutankhamen's tomb. Aztec and Toltec craftsmanship in gold was at least the equal of Egyptian art, if not superior to it."

Waiting for Tommy in the motel room was the camping gear Dr. Bonilla had provided—a foam rubber ground pad, a down sleeping bag and waterproof duffle sack or "drybag" to keep it in, a plastic tarp which could double as a tube tent in case of rain, and a war surplus ammunition box in which to protect such fragile items as his Nikon camera, zoom lens, extra film and two-meter radio.

During his lunch with Doc Bonilla at a nearby coffee shop, the old Spaniard kept the conversation casual, mostly an exchange of recent ham radio experiences and the mammoth strides Amateur Radio had made in recent years with teletype, television transmissions, moon-bounced signals, orbiting satellites, computers, and QSOs with ham operators aboard space shuttles.

Going directly to the briefing session in Room 228-B, they found the entire personnel of their Grand Canyon trip awaiting them. Dr. Bonilla's five introductions were delivered so rapidly that Tommy had difficulty composing his mental notes:

Dr. Ellwood Sixto, director of the Arizona State Bureau of Antiquities, was a man of 40. He was a head shorter than Tommy, wearing a shoebrush pompadour and thick-lensed eyeglasses which made his humorless green eyes appear grotesquely magnified—eyes which always seemed to slide away from direct contact.

"Cap'n Jolly" Rogers, the veteran river-runner who would be piloting their raft down the Grand Canyon: shaggy of beard, unkempt of dress, cranky of disposition, crusty-voiced, with a button nose red as a marachino cherry above a tobacco-stained Stalin mustache.

Cap'n Jolly impressed Tommy Rockford as being unlikeable, but Dr. Bonilla had said that Dr. Sixto has recommended Cap'n Jolly as being more knowledgeable about the Grand Canyon and Colorado River running than any man in Arizona, therefore of vital importance to the mission lying ahead of them.

"Castor and Pollux," the two gargantuan bodyguards who, it turned out, spoke not one word of English, seemed disinclined to converse in their native Spanish either. Of Aztec Indian descent,

black-haired, copper-skinned and craggy-faced, they had been assigned to accompany Dr. Bonilla on this expedition by the Mexican government, for reasons secretly doubted by the beneficiary of their protection. Each was a muscular hulk, carried Uzi machine pistols concealed under ponchos they wore even in the June heat, and, as Dr. Bonilla had complained while driving in from the airport this morning, dogged his every move like a pair of unwelcome shadows. They were, in essence, necessary evils.

Cap'n Jolly's "crew" consisted of one middle-aged cook, Whitey Rosegart, a victim of head injuries suffered during the Tet Offensive of the Vietnam war, which had left him slightly retarded, moody and withdrawn. As if to compensate for his personality handicaps, Rosegart, an ex-army cook, had achieved a reputation for gourmet menus even in wilderness surroundings. According to Dr. Sixto, he had served the tastiest meals on the river during his 10 years of white-water river-running, to the pleasure of uncounted hundreds of adventuresome tourists who had signed up to run rapids with Cap'n Rogers' Flagstaff-based "Rogers' River Rats, Inc."

Introductions over, Dr. Bonilla got down to business. He explained his discovery of Friar Salazar's 400-year-old parchment which, when decoded, told of a large repository of artifacts abandoned by the Anasazis around 1140 AD, when, for unknown reasons, possibly a drought of long duration, the entire tribe had departed their Grand Canyon habitat, never to return.

As Dr. Bonilla was relating his fictional "Anasazi version" of the story, Tommy Rockford and Dr. Sixto exchanged glances. They were the only other persons in the room who knew that a fabulous cache of Aztec treasure was their actual objective.

"This cache of artifacts will be of incalculable value to students of ancient Indian cultures, both in Mexico and in Arizona," Dr. Bonilla wound up his narrative. "If the archeological nature of our trip became known, we could be overwhelmed by the news media, souvenir-hunting tourists and perhaps even rival scientists. We, who are gathered in this room today, must put on a front of being just another boatload of vacationers running the rapids. So I implore you, Señores—act like people on holiday!"

Cap'n Jolly took out a jackknife and pared himself a chunk of cut plug tobacco, which he tucked between cheek and gum before commenting, "The Grand Canyon is 280 miles long from Lee's Ferry

to the glorified cesspool and settling tank they call Lake Mead. Just how do you aim to locate this Injun stuff if it's been buried for over 400 years, Doc? Did the priest draw you a map?"

Dr. Bonilla's eyes flashed with a zealot's excitement. "No, but the Salazar Parchment is a running diary of the floating-log trip he made with a group of six soldiers under the command of one of Coronado's officers, Capitan Juan Vicente Ventura. The friar had been educated as an engineer before he entered the priesthood, so his entries are precise and, I am sure, accurate. He describes specific landmarks encountered along the river, and has logged how many hours of floating time they are apart—"

"Specific landmarks?" Cap'n Jolly interrupted. "Give me an example. That's where my know-how would come in handy."

"Well, the first landmark Salazar mentions is '*La mina de sal de los Indios*'—the Indian Salt Mines, on the '*orilla izquierda*', or left bank. Is such a landmark familiar to you, Capitan?"

Cap'n Jolly nodded. "The Sacred Hopi Salt Mines at Mile 64 fit that description. I'll show 'em to you when we pass 'em day after tomorrow."

"And just above the Salt Mines, a major tributary flows into the river 'from the direction of the rising sun'?"

"That would be the Little Colorado River," Cap'n Jolly said. It's the only tributary in that part of the Grand Canyon."

Dr. Bonilla continued, "We can safely assume the Spaniards entered the river at Lee's Ferry, since it is near the mouth of the Paria River. The parchment says they floated 'swiftly and continuously' for 18 hours before finally being flung ashore at the foot of 'the mightiest rapid in Christendom.' "

"There's 70-odd major rapids on the river," Cap'n Jolly muttered skeptically. "Sortin' out which one the Friar referred to might take some doin'."

Dr. Bonilla went on, "Not necessarily, Capitan. I am informed that the Colorado River flows about four miles per hour. Four times 18 hours would mean they first touched land 72 miles from their starting point. According to my river map, the 'mightiest rapid' would be today's Unkar Rapid, upstream from Mile 73—which Dr. Sixto informs me is in an area of well-known Anasazi ruins on both sides of the river. Salazar's cache of artifacts is somewhere an unspecified distance downstream from that big rapid, according to the parchment."

Dr. Bonilla stopped talking as he saw Cap'n Jolly shaking his head gloomily. "You disagree with my interpretation of Salazar's account, Capitan?" the Spaniard inquired stiffly.

After a trip to the bathroom for a plastic wastebasket which could serve as a cuspidor, Cap'n Jolly gave forth with the first revelation of expert knowledge that confirmed his reputation for being a veritable walking encyclopedia of Grand Canyon lore.

"You're all botched up, Doc. First place, Unkar Rapid is only a dribble. They rate it six on a scale of ten. Which means it falls a long way short o' bein' the 'mightiest rapid' your priest friend described. Second place, your calculations are based on the river flow averagin' four mile an hour. That figure is dead wrong."

Dr. Bonilla clamped his mouth in annoyance.

"I obtained my information from the Bureau of Reclamation's 1985 government report, Capitan," he retorted sharply. "It is based on scientifically accurate hydrographic statistics!"

Cap'n Jolly lifted his ram's-horn mustache with a finger and spat a brown stream into his makeshift cuspidor. "Don't auger with *me*, boss! Sure, the river flowed four mile an hour in 1985. But your Spaniards were floatin' downstream four hundred year ago, when the Colorado flowed 10-12 mile an hour. Quite a differ'nce."

"I take it you were there in 1540 to measure the current, Capitan?" Dr. Bonilla asked sarcastically. It was already apparent to an amused Tommy Rockford and Dr. Sixto that Bonilla and his boat skipper were facing some future personality conflicts.

Cap'n Jolly leaned over to jab the Spanish archeologist in the ribs with a finger aimed like a pistol barrel. "You listen to me, Señor Know-it-all. I was runnin' this river long afore they ruined everything by buildin' that hod-danged concrete monstrosity at the head o' Glen Canyon to create that mud-collecting sewer they call Lake Powell. Named fer the first man to ever run the rapids in the Grand Canyon, back in 1869, thereby insultin' Major Powell's memory. Before that dad-wallopin' outrage was committed in 1963—"

Dr. Sixto broke in with a laugh to dampen the electric tension: "Jolly is referring to Glen Canyon Dam, gentlemen. You can gather that as an environmentalist, he takes a dim view of progress."

"Before they damned the pertiest canyon God ever created," Cap'n Jolly went on angrily, "the river flowed 10 mile an hour. The water was red as wine an' warm enough to enjoy bathin' in. After

the dam, with man instead o' God controlin' the water down the river, the flow turned cold and dropped to four mile an hour. Which means you're goin' to have to eat some raw crow, Doc, because your figgers are plumb out o' kilter by nearly 60 percent."

Dr. Bonilla nodded humbly. "I understand," he murmured apologetically, tugging his beard as he did some mental arithmetic. "Using your figures, it means that if the Spaniards floated 18 hours without a stop at 10 miles an hour, the 'mightiest rapid' would have dumped them ashore at Mile 180."

Tommy Rockford spoke up excitedly, "I haven't got a river map handy, but I'll bet you that Mile 180 is where you'll find Crystal Rapid! I ran the river with my Dad when I was 9 years old, and I tell you, Crystal was the scariest white water I ever saw!"

"Crystal is a Number Ten rapid today," the old man agreed, "but it warn't even there when the Spaniards run the river in 1540, young feller. You see, Crystal Rapid is a new arrival. Dates from a big rock slide that blocked the river at Crystal Creek in 1966. To an old codger like me, 1966 is the day before yesterday."

Across the room, Dr. Sixto murmured, "Didn't I tell you Cap'n Jolly is the world's champion when it comes to Canyon trivia?"

Dr. Bonilla clapped his hands for attention. "Capitan, would you remember off-hand if there is a major rapid in the vicinity of Mile 180 below Lee's Ferry? Dr. Sixto assures me you are familiar with every centimeter of the river and the canyon."

The grizzled old river runner grunted to acknowledge the compliment. "Now this time you're makin' sense, Doc. The longest white water stretch on the hull danged river is Lava Rapid, a ten-plus on any man's scale. Drops 37 foot in less'n 400 yards. Lava Rapid is located midway between Mile 179 and 180!"

Dr. Bonilla's excitement at this news was shared by Tommy Rockford and Dr. Sixto, if not by Castor and Pollux and Whitey Rosegart. They were having trouble stifling yawns as they stared out the window at the shiny aluminum dome of the world-famous Lowell Observatory, atop a pine-forested hilltop west of town.

"Then this means," Dr. Bonilla said breathlessly, "that the Anasazi artifacts will be found in one of the small side canyons downstream from Lava Rapid! The Salazar Parchment gives clues—"

"Just what are these clues, Doc?" the river pilot inquired. "I can shut my eyes an' see that stretch of canyon below Mile 180 like

I was there in person. I can lead you to any landmark you name."

Dr. Bonilla pawed in his wallet and drew out a paper on which he had copied the text of the Salazar Parchment.

"The Anasazi cache," he said, "is hidden in what he calls the Cave of Skeletons at the dead end of *El Arroyo del Sumidero*, or Quicksand Gulch, so named because of a quicksand bog guarding the entrance of the arroyo—"

Cap'n Jolly's whiskered face assumed the doleful jowly look of a basset hound. "Sorry, Doc. You'll find quicksand bogs at the mouth of danged near every side crick that flows into the Grand Canyon. Must be a hunderd of 'em match the ol' padre's description."

For a moment Dr. Bonilla looked crestfallen. Then, consulting his notes again, he exclaimed, "I don't expect this hunt to be easy. But we can *pinpoint* the location of Sumidero Canyon, Capitan! The parchment says that the Cave of Skeletons is located in 'the third arroyo downstream from the Sign of the Maltese Cross.' You see, Capitan, friendly Indians helped Friar Salazar get out of the Grand Canyon—Dr. Sixto guesses at Havasu Canyon. But before he left from where they had buried—from where they found the Anasazi artifacts, in order to identify the place if the Spaniards ever returned, he used the butt of his bronze crucifix as a tool to chip a petroglyph on a black cliff somewhere downstream from the big rapid—he doesn't say how far—to serve as a witness point for locating the cache."

Cap'n Jolly nodded and groped around for his spittoon. Shifting the tobacco cud to his other cheek, he drawled, "They's scads of Injun pictures in Grand Canyon, yeah. I know 'em by heart. Like I tell the dudes, pictographs were put on the rock with paint, but petroglyphs were chiseled out of the black desert varnish to expose the tan base rock underneath. So what's your petroglyph look like, Doc? Sounds to me like it's the key t' your whole danged operation. Without it you'd have to call it quits."

Dr. Bonilla's cheeks flushed with excitement. "The parchment describes the petroglyph as 'a Cruz de Malta, one *vara* high and one *vara* wide.' A *vara* is 33 inches. That would set it apart from the animals and moons and stars and other mysterious symbols the Indians left behind, Capitan. If you know where this Maltese Cross petroglyph is—he doesn't say which side of the river it's on or how far it is below the big rapid—the parchment puts the top of the cross at a man's height above the base of the cliff—then we can easily locate the Arroyo

Sumidero and our Anasazi cache!"

Time seemed to stop. Tommy Rockford held his breath, his eyes riveted on Cap'n Jolly as the old man's jaws worked on his wad of nicotine. Finally, the river runner's rubbery face took on its woebegone bassett hound expression again.

"Doc, I got no hankerin' to spoil your fun. But I owe it to you to be honest, so I got two things to say . . . The first is, after 400 years, there ain't a chance of a flea on a hot griddle that your Anasazi hoard will still be in that cave. Not with droves of perfessers like Doc Sixto here snoopin' around, or Hollywood pot-hunters lookin' for souvenirs. The second thing is, man an' boy, I've run the Grand Canyon rapids goin' on 50 year now, me an' my pappy afore me. I've studied ever' square inch o' the slickrock cliffs and ever' side canyon betwixt Lake Powell an' Lake Mead a hundred times. But never in my life have I ever laid eyes on no Maltese Cross."

For a long moment silence lay heavily in the motel room, a silence broken only by the discordant hum of the air conditioner. Tommy Rockford thought he saw tears starting in Doc Bonilla's eye as he faced up to the inescapable truth of the river pilot's words. Without Friar Salazar's Maltese Cross, the expedition was doomed to failure. Locating one specific arroyo in a canyon that was thousands of feet deep and as much as 15 miles wide could take a lifetime of trial-and-error exploring.

He turned to Dr. Sixto and said heavily, "You are more familiar with Grand Canyon archeological sites than I, *amigo*. Would you advise me to abandon this expedition here and now? Without that Maltese Cross starting point, the whole project is—hopeless."

Cap'n Jolly interjected hastily, "You decide to quit, Doc, I'll be glad to refund yore deposit money. I can always pick up a load of college kids, or senior citizens makin' a last fling."

Tommy wondered to himself, "Why does Cap'n Jolly seem so anxious to get Doc to call off the expedition? Maybe it's because he knows where the Maltese Cross is, and wants to track down the Cave of Skeletons for himself and grab those artifacts to sell on the souvenir market—"

Dr. Sixto was scowling, thinking over Bonilla's question. Finally he said, "Dr. Bonilla, without discounting the validity of Captain Jolly's adverse opinion, I suggest you carry on your plans. When we reach Lava Rapid we can scour both sides of the canyon with a

fine-tooth comb, inch by inch. Bushes could have grown up and obscured your Maltese Cross. Captain Jolly is human—he could have overlooked something that, considering the enormity of the Grand Canyon, would be as insignificant as a grain of sand in a desert."

Dr. Bonilla came to his feet, eyeing Cap'n Jolly defiantly, as if he, too, shared Tommy's suspicion that the acid-tongued skipper might have some ulterior reason for urging that he cancel the trip.

Crossing the room, the Spaniard delved into a cardboard box and came up with seven small cartons bearing the logos of the Tandy Radio Shack Chain.

"When we reach the area below Lava Rapid where we will begin searching for the Maltese Cross," he said, "we may have to scatter up and down the canyon for miles, checking out every side canyon. We will need a means of keeping in touch with each other. I have determined that Citizens' Band radio, which requires no federal licensing, will work for short distances, even in the Grand Canyon."

"I have here individual Citizens' Band walkie-talkies," he said, beginning to pass out the boxes. "Six-channel, five-watt Realistic TRC-215s, funded by my sponsors in Mexico City. We will use Channel 14 for short-range communication during our treasure hunt. Each comes with eight spare AA cells. Each of you will be responsible for his own handie-talkie. Any question, gentlemen?"

Cap'n Jolly used the wastebasket cuspidor one more time. "This means, I take it, that your river run is still on? Even though it all depends on findin' a Maltese Cross I ga'rancee don't exist?"

Doc Bonilla raised himself to his full height. "We will board a chartered bus here at the motel tomorrow at 0800 hours sharp," he said, "for the two-hour ride up to Lee's Ferry. You will launch our raft into the river at your earliest convenience, Capitan. I have spent too much time and money and come too far not to at least launch my own thorough search for Friar Salazar's Maltese Cross... If there are no further questions, our orientation meeting is now adjourned, gentlemen. I will see you at breakfast *mañana*."

Tommy Rockford, catching a discreet signal from their host, remained behind after the others had left. EA7WK asked, "You brought your two-meter unit as I requested?"

"I did Doc. My IC2-AT—best little hand-held rig I ever owned. But if you're going Citizens's Band on this trip, I think I'll deposit my two-meter rig in the safety vault here at the motel until we get

back, along with my wallet and other valuables."

Doc Bonilla shook his head. "No, Tomás. I have my two-meter transceiver with me also, because I want the two of us to be able to communicate with each other on sensitive matters without the others being able to listen in while we're busy treasure-hunting."

Tommy said, "One thing puzzles me, Doc. If we find the gold—when we find the gold—what happens then?"

"You and I—with my Gemini protectors—will remain behind to guard the treasure. Cap'n Jolly will take Dr. Sixto on to Pierce Ferry on Lake Mead, where a truck will be waiting to haul the raft back to Flagstaff. When Dr. Sixto arrives there, he will get in touch with the Governor and return with a heavy escort of Arizona State Troopers to transport the gold safely out to a Phoenix bank. With many millions of dollars at stake, we can't run the risk of a highjacking attempt by the likes of Duke Hollister."

CHAPTER FIVE

A Sinister Resemblance

At mid-morning next day, Dr. Bonilla's chartered bus from Flagstaff rolled to a dust-clouded stop at the end of an oil road which led down to the boat-launching area at Lee's Ferry. As Tommy Rockford alighted from the bus, he was aware that he was setting foot on soil that was steeped in Western frontier history.

This was where the Paria River, which drains the high red rock plateau of south central Utah, enters the Colorado River. It had deposited a broad alluvial fan to form a delta. This break was the first in hundreds of miles of high canyon walls where vehicles could be driven to the water's edge.

In 1871 an exploring party of American engineers led by one-armed Civil War hero, Major John Wesley Powell, had floated past this pebbly shore on the first recorded run ever made by a white man through the hitherto unexplored Grand Canyon.

That same year, the excommunicated Mormon outlaw John Doyle Lee had come to this place and built himself a rock-and-mud cabin where he could hide out from bounty hunters who sought to arrest him for his alleged part in Utah's notorious "Mountain Meadow Massacre" of an overland emigrant train some twenty years before.

Lee had christened the place "Lonely Dell" and had opened the only ferry across the river east of the Grand Canyon, a ferry service that was to operate for 58 years until 1929, when it was replaced by the Navajo Bridge four miles downstream. As for Lee, he atoned for his multiple murders when he was executed by a firing squad in 1877 and was buried in Panguitch by one of his several wives.

Across the silent gliding river the remains of "Lee's Dugway"

could still be seen, a road used by prairie schooners and Mormon farm wagons, hewn out of a sheer cliff of Shinarump conglomerate the color of newly minted pennies. The most recent evidence of man's intrusion on the Colorado River scene was colossal Glen Canyon Dam, fifteen miles upstream, the object of environmentalists' controversy since 1963.

Today was June 26, well into the peak tourist season on the Colorado River. Shimmering in over one-hundred-degree heat, the Lee's Ferry parking lot was jammed with campers and vans, RVs and ORVs, and private cars belonging to tourists who were either rafting the rapids, or were about to.

The shelving beach swarmed with people of all ages, mostly clad in bathing suits, clustered around their respective river guides to receive final travel instructions before boarding the armada of tethered neoprene rafts, wooden dories, fiberglass kayaks and speedboats which lined the river's edge like racehorses straining at the starting gate.

Cap'n Jolly and Whitey Rosegart were already here, having left Flagstaff at daybreak for the 140-mile journey across Navajo country, accompanying a truck loaded with supplies and the deflated thirty-foot raft and its two horn-tipped pontoons.

Dr. Bonilla, wearing a camouflage jumpsuit, was acting as flustered as a hen with a flock of ducklings as the members of his secret expedition hauled their drybags and ammo boxes out of the luggage well of the bus. They obediently followed Bonilla down the shingle beach to where Cap'n Jolly was busy pumping air into the compartmented rubber raft and its outrigger pontoons, using a device similar to a bicycle pump. The bologna-shaped pontoons, Tommy noticed with a start, bore the stigmatized name "TITANIC" on their silver-colored skins, prompting K6ATX to wonder if that could be a harbinger of a dire fate to come—but not from icebergs.

"Listen, ever'body!" Cap'n Jolly bellowed as his group approached. "It's goin' to be another couple hours before we can shove off, but we can make it sooner if you fellers with strong backs an' weak minds will lend a hand totin' cargo down from the truck. A week, ten days on the river takes a lot of grub and gear."

Tommy strolled over to a truck labeled ROGERS' RIVER RATS INC., FLAGSTAFF, AZ, to help chef Whitey Rosegart unload a pair of five-gallon coolers filled with fresh water and grape-flavored Koolaid. It was dangerous to get dehydrated in summer; the best travel times in Arizona, especially the Grand Canyon, were spring and fall.

Coming back to the truck for another load, K6ATX exchanged greetings with the truck driver, a college-fullback type whose T-shirt identified him as a fan of the Chicago Bears. He remained in the air-conditioned cab, his summer vacation job apparently not calling for any manual labor aside from truck driving.

"You know," Tommy chuckled, "I have a hunch your boss Jolly Rogers isn't the unsophisticated old desert rat he pretends to be. He could be an actor playing a sidekick to John Wayne or the Lone Ranger. A clone of Gabby Hayes."

The young truck driver replied in a conspiratorial undertone, "Go to the head of the class, man. You are dead right. All that bragging about running the river for fifty years man an' boy, that's hogwash—not that he isn't the best river runner there is. But the gullible tourists gobble up the Old Cowboy bit and ask for more. The little old ladies take snapshots of Jolly and tell the folks back home they met a genu-wine Old West pioneer."

"What's the real scoop? Is Cap'n Jolly a millionaire in disguise?"

"No, but he's well-off. Cap'n Jolly came to Arizona thirty years ago from Seattle, his lungs rotting with tuberculosis. He hoped the dry climate in Arizona would clear up the TB, and it did, as you can see. At the time, he was a professor of anthropology at the University of Washington. He never went back. Used to sail boats on Puget Sound, so he started up an Arizona river-running business—and he's prospered. Got more money in the bank than you and I will ever have. During the off season you'll find him driving around Flag in a late model Mercedes, beard shaved off, wearing tailor-made suits, a dame on either arm. You'd never recognize him as the grizzled old sourdough front he puts on for the benefit of the tourist dudes from Missouri."

"Even the name Jolly Rogers sounds made up," Tommy prompted.

"Heck, yes! It's a name he took from the black an' white Jolly Roger flag with the skull an' crossbones, the one pirates flew on their ships in the Caribbean. Nobody knows his real name."

A look of concern crossed the truck driver's face. "Don't you ever let on I blew his cover, man, or I would be a quick candidate for homicide, and I need this job. I got a little too much beer in me this morning or I wouldn't have talked so loose."

Tommy reached up to shake the jock's hand reassuringly. "Don't worry, pal, mum's the word. Now I have to get busy unloading these

jerry cans for Whitey or he won't feed me tonight."

As he shouldered a red five-gallon can of gasoline for the raft's twenty-horsepower motor, Tommy's serene face belied the turmoil he was feeling inside. Had Doc Bonilla been wise in entrusting his life and perhaps a king's ransom in Aztec gold to a stranger whose assumed name might be masking a criminal background?

Later, as Tommy was making his fourth trip from truck to raft with Whitey's portable propane cookstove for use at night camps, he was met by Doc Bonilla. The two bodyguards, Castor and Pollux, following their instructions never to let the old Spaniard out of their sight, were carrying the *Titanic*'s heavy outboard motor between them, their Uzi pistols concealed under their ponchos.

"I just made the mistake of commenting on how the river is clear and green, instead of red like I thought the Colorado to be," Bonilla said ruefully. "I had to listen to another angry lecture from the Capitan about how Glen Canyon Dam traps all the silt which gave the river its red coloration. I tell you, Tomás, the man is a fanatic on the subject of environmental protection. If I didn't know he was Arizona's most knowledgeable expert on the Grand Canyon, I would be tempted to hire another pilot. He is a most annoying man to be around, always picking a quarrel."

It was on the tip of Tommy's tongue to voice his own doubts about Cap'n Jolly, especially in view of what he had just learned from the young truck driver, but Bonilla turned and hurried away, his dusky bodyguards trailing him, not letting the outboard motor slow them down.

When the truck was finally unloaded, with perhaps an hour to kill before the *Titanic* was ready to put in the river, Tommy walked over to where the passengers' personal gear was stacked up and located his ammo box. It bore the number 73, an appropriate ID for a radio ham since the two numerals were the Morse code abbreviation for "best regards."

From the box he took out his ICOM two-meter rig. Even with only a watt and a half output power and a "rubber ducky" antenna, K6ATX believed he might pick up a signal inside a twenty-mile radius of Lee's Ferry. There was nothing more enjoyable than a random ham contact to pass the time. And if he could break a repeater that had a ten-meter output capability, it might even be possible to make an overseas DX phone contact.

Tommy walked over to sit down on a handy boulder near the water's edge and switched on his HT, as hams called their handie-talkies. A moment of tuning netted him a fellow ham calling CQ, the somewhat outmoded CW mating call meaning "I'll talk to anybody who'll answer." This told K6ATX that the ham was probably an OT, or old-timer. The built-in speaker had sufficient volume to attract the attention of an elderly couple standing nearby, who moved over to listen, frankly eavesdropping.

"Hello CQ, hello CQ, this is KB6 Kilo Sierra Golf, mobile near Page, Arizona. This is KB6KSG, monitoring the frequency. Wotsay?"

Tommy pushed his talk button and spoke into the built-in mike, "KB6KSG mobile, here's King Six Alpha Tango X-Ray at Lee's Ferry. Read you five-by-nine, Old Man. Handle here is Tommy. Copy?"

"Hey, Tommy, K6ATX! We've worked each other before, I think. My home QTH is Lompoc, Santa Barbara County. I'm Tim. Go ahead."

The elderly couple edged in a little closer as Tommy returned, "My home QTH is Santa Bonita, Tim, so we live about fifty miles apart. I'm just getting ready to run the rapids down the Grand Canyon. What brings you to Arizona in the hot season?"

Tim responded, "Aim to rent a houseboat for a week and do some fishin' on Lake Powell. I hear there's no radio reception in the Grand Canyon though. Rig here is a 25-watt Kenwood TR-7730. You?"

K6ATX sighed. He preferred to talk about other things than ham gear on a QSO, but many amateurs could discuss nothing else.

"I'm using an IC-2AT, Tim. 800 channels synthesized, Touchtone pad. You're only fifteen miles away—what's my R-S reading in Page? K6ATX over."

KB6KSG's voice held an apologetic note as he came back: "I hate to break off this fine-business QSO so soon, Tommy, but I'm about to pull into a service station for a pit stop, and I gotta go in more ways than one, hi. I'll leave you with a funny, Tom: The cannibal said, 'Since religion has gone ecumenical, all the missionaries seem to taste the same!' ... KB6KSG mobile signing clear with K6ATX. 73, Tommy, and thanks much for the FB contact."

After Tommy had signed clear, he looked up at the elderly couple alongside and gave them a friendly "Yo!" to allay their obvious embarrassment at having been caught eavesdropping.

"Excuse us for being so nosey, young man," the gray-haired

woman said, "but Jeremy an' me, our son Marc got blinded and crippled in a motorcycle accident last year. He'll be confined to a wheelchair for life, and him only thirty come October. We just moved down from Calamus, Ioway, for his sake, down to the Sun Belt at Tucson. We don't know a soul, and our boy Marc is so lonesome! I thought maybe ham radio would be a good hobby for a man in a wheelchair. And his Pa, too. Jeremy wanders around the house fit to be tied, bored stiff since he sold the farm."

Jeremy grumbled sourly, "I'm sixty-seven, too danged old to learn new tricks. Ham radio? Heck, I can barely turn a TV dial."

Tommy laughed. "You're never too old to become a radio ham, sir. I know of hams who are past ninety. And speaking of Iowa, there is a kid named Guy Mitchell in your state who passed his Novice exam and got a license at age four—before he entered kindergarten! As for your handicapped son, ham radio could be his passport to the whole wide world, without leaving his wheelchair."

Jeremy's wife tapped a bony finger on K6ATX's two-meter rig.

"Marc loves to talk. He was a history teacher before the accident. I think it would be a perfect cure for his lonesomeness. How could our boy go about being a ham operator?"

"Easiest thing in the world, ma'am." K6ATX took out a pencil and scrap of paper and jotted down a name and address which he handed to the woman. "You drop a card to our ham organization, the ARRL, in Newington, Connecticut. They'll put you in touch with one of their Registered Amateur Radio Instructors in the Tucson area. They'll have Marc on the air before you know it. It's inexpensive, and for a retiree like you, Mr. Jeremy, it'll open up new worlds for you and your son to explore together."

Jeremy turned to his wife, a grin replacing his sour expression. "Marthy, I believe I'll give 'er a try!" Turning back to Tommy he said, "Can you show us how you operate again?"

"Glad to." Tommy lifted the IC-2AT to his lips and was in the act of putting another call on the air when he saw something that froze him stiff as a statue.

A shiny, ink-black speedboat had just thrust its prow into the sand bank a few yards away and a man in a wide-brimmed straw hat, a red-and-white Hawaiian shirt and plaid boxer shorts jumped on shore. A pair of high-power binoculars was slung around his neck and a plastic water bottle was hooked onto his belt. The stranger was

holding a Citizens' Band handie-talkie in one hand.

A typical male tourist—but the man's face was what sent the adrenalin pumping through Tommy Rockford's veins. It was a face that bore a sinister resemblance to the Interpol ID photograph Doc Bonilla had shown him yesterday—the face of the international museum bandit, Duke Hollister!

CHAPTER SIX

Peril at Lee's Ferry

At that moment a nearby river guide shouted through cupped hands, "Calling all Canyoneers! Gather 'round—before we board I have to brief you on how to pack your drybags and squeeze the trapped air out of 'em before you close the waterproof seals."

Martha grabbed Jeremy by the arm and cried, "The Canyoneers! That's our group, dear! Come on—we can't miss our first roll call!"

Tommy Rockford, pleased that he had probably hooked two new recruits for Amateur Radio, acknowledged the couple's fervent thanks and hasty farewells, and turned his attention toward the speedboat from which Duke Hollister's look-alike had just disembarked.

Gold lettering on the prow identified it as the *Black Javelin*. The pilot, a sun-bronzed, beefy-shouldered man wearing a New York Yankees baseball cap, blue-and-white striped T-shirt, and faded dungarees stuffed into spike-heeled cowboy boots, was busy wiping muddy spray off his Plexiglas windshield.

K6ATX turned back to Duke Hollister's double, who by now was coming abreast of the rock where Tommy was sitting. He was striding at a rapid pace toward the upper parking lot. The square-cut red beard was now reduced to a pencil-thin mustache, but the ice-blue eyes, the prominent cheekbones and the thick-corded neck seemed identical to the features Tommy had seen in the police mug shot.

Too late, Tommy recalled the one identifying feature which could prove whether or not the man from the *Black Javelin* was actually Duke Hollister: the blue tattoo in the shape of a serpent, coiled around the wrist of the hand that held the transceiver.

By now, the man was lost to view behind a parked pickup truck, striding through the rows of parked vehicles, perhaps to board his own car.

Clipping his two-meter rig to his belt, Tommy Rockford took off in pursuit. If indeed the man he was stalking was the felon who had once stolen the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre and held it for a seven-figure ransom, there could only be two reasons to account for his showing up here at an out-of-the-way place like Lee's Ferry, Arizona.

Somehow, Hollister must have penetrated Doc Bonilla's carefully guarded secret and knew that the true reason for coming to the Grand Canyon was to locate a cache of Aztec gold. Such a treasure would certainly attract a master thief of Hollister's caliber. The only other motive that could have brought the Museum Bandit to this remote marina on the Colorado River was even more frightening: his vow to kill Antonio Bonilla to avenge his older brother's sentence of life imprisonment. Either way, Tommy knew he had to find out whether this stranger was actually Hollister.

By the time K6ATX reached the rows of parked vehicles, his quarry was laboring up a steep footpath which switchbacked toward the ruins of a rock-and-mud cabin perched on the skyline of a low, red rock ridge overlooking the boat launching area.

Mormon outcast John D. Lee had erected that cabin, one of Arizona's more obscure historical landmarks, more than a century past. Hundreds of tourists had probably climbed that stony trail up to the cabin, not so much to inspect the ruins of a dead man's pioneer shelter as to take advantage of the panoramic vista.

Watching from a vantage point behind a parked tour bus, Tommy saw the straw-hatted man follow the skyline until he reached Lee's cabin, disappearing through the open doorway. A moment later he reappeared at one of the two windows which faced the river.

Sunlight flashed off the upraised lenses of the binoculars. Was he enjoying the desert vista—or keeping someone or something under the surveillance of his high-powered glasses?

A sense of forboding filled K6ATX as he studied the rocky slope. He had to get a closer look at the stranger from the black speedboat. It would be foolhardy to take the path which slanted up the flinty slope, if the man was indeed Duke Hollister.

Off to the left was a crack in the hillside, probably following the

line of an earthquake fault. It appeared deep enough to hide him, and long enough for him to reach the back side of the ridge without being observed by the man in the rock-and-mud cabin.

Mopping perspiration from his brow and neck with a pocket bandanna, Tommy pulled his Dodger cap down to shade his eyes and worked his way along a line of cars until he could cross the road which followed the north bank of the Colorado four miles up to Navajo Bridge. Shielded from the view of the mystery man in the Lee cabin by an intervening outcrop of red sandstone, K6ATX ducked into the faultline ravine and began clambering up its rocky pit.

The thermometer was probably pushing 150 degrees inside this rock-ribbed defile. Tommy was gasping like a landed fish by the time he gained the summit and emerged from the defile on the shady side of the ridge. Emerging into the open air was like exchanging a bake oven for a hot griddle.

The rear wall of the cabin had one door but no windows. The near gable end had no openings at all. It would be safe, then, to approach the structure from the rear, but he would have to move with catlike stealth. The only sound to break the brooding silence of the desert was the hearty voice of a river guide instructing his eager congregation of raft mates:

"Howdy, folks, I'm Larry Peck, your pilot and tour guide. This guy with the white sun lotion on his nose is our chef and co-pilot Brad Bingham, and the lovely lady on my right is a vacationing geology professor from the U of A in Tempe, Judy Schmitz, who will provide us with rock talks during the week so we can get a greater appreciation of the geology we are passing."

If the voice was annoyingly loud in Tommy's ears, it would be equally loud for the man with the binoculars. At least it would help cover any crunching of gravel underfoot as K6ATX approached the rear of the abandoned house.

Tommy was having difficulty suppressing the sound of his breathing by the time he arrived at the corner of the cabin and began inching his way along the back wall toward the rear doorway. At one point he had to detour around a collection of rusty farm implements leaning against the wall. His shortness of breath was due more to excitement and heat than to elevation. Even for a person born and brought up in a sea-level environment, Lee's Ferry's 3107-foot elevation would not affect his pulse rate that much.

As he neared the back entrance of the cabin he distinctly heard the man's voice inside: "...he's with the party helping load the raft with *Titanic* on its sides. Yankee black humor, that... You see him—the old bloke with the bald head and the eye patch..."

Cold sweat beaded the pores of Tommy's neck. At first he believed the man was talking to a companion inside the cabin. Then he realized that he was transmitting on his handie-talkie to someone else, probably the pilot of his launch.

And the man he was referring to had to be Doc Bonilla!

K6ATX reached the door then, and peered cautiously around its edge. The cabin roof consisted of pole rafters, the shingles having long since blown away to expose the Arizona sky. The floor had originally been hand-hewn puncheons, most of which had been cannibalized for campfires. There was light enough streaming in from overhead for Tommy Rockford to see the back of the man in the Hawaiian shirt. He was standing slightly back from the window so as not to show himself to anyone outside, binoculars leveled on the busy scene at the boat launching area below. He was holding his CB radio pressed to his left ear, the volume turned so low that Tommy barely heard the incoming transmission:

"...see him now, Chief. We got plenty of time. The starboard pontoon ain't even been aired up yet. They won't shove off for another thirty minutes, I'd say. I count a party of six. I thought you were told there were seven in all."

From where he stood, Tommy had a clear view of the sunlight illuminating the man's short-sleeved left arm and hand, raised to hold the handie-talkie to his ear. Now he had the final proof he had prayed he would not discover: a blue tattoo in the form of a snake coiled around the man's left wrist.

Heart hammering his ribs, Tommy drew back, uncertain what to do next. He knew his own six-foot stature and solid hundred and eighty pounds of bone and muscle made him at least an even match physically with Duke Hollister. Although he was more than a year past his last football practice, he believed he was in better shape than the Museum Bandit. But Hollister was probably armed. Tommy turned his attention to the row of old farm implements leaning against the back wall—several shovels, a double-bitted ax, a hoe, a garden rake, their warped hickory handles deteriorated by the weathering of years since some homesteader or ferryman had abandoned Lee's cabin and

returned to greener pastures.

Tommy picked up the ax and hefted it. The blades were dull, but the flat sides would make a formidable weapon if he needed one.

Sucking in a deep breath to steady his nerves, K6ATX stepped to the door and over the log threshold, just as Hollister was making another transmission on his CB rig: "—the two big blokes, look like Indians, must be the bodyguards. They carry Uzis and probably know how to use 'em. Once we've disposed of th—"

The crunch of a shoe sole on sand which had blown in to cover the puncheon floor of the cabin made Hollister break off. He spun around, just as Tommy Rockford lunged forward, the ax swung back for a chopping blow if needed. With one hand holding a handie-talkie and the other his binoculars, Hollister was caught at a disadvantage, in no position to reach for the holstered pistol which made an ominous bulge under his left armpit.

"I say!—looks like I've got company, Slade!" Hollister spoke coolly into his radio mike. "Our missing seventh person. The ham radio chap from Santa Bonita, I would say—"

Before Hollister could move, Tommy swung the flat of the ax blade to knock the transceiver from the outlaw's grasp. Hollister's pilot knew he was in trouble and might come racing to his rescue.

"We meet again, Señor Hollister?" the husky youth panted. "That was you reading Doc's letter in my radio shack the other night, wasn't it? Get your arms up as high as you can reach or I'll chop your skull open like an overripe melon. Okay? I want that gun you're packing under your shirt. Just freeze as you are. Then we'll talk... before I turn you over to a Park Ranger."

Duke Hollister's hooded eyes held the cold menace of a rattlesnake's as he raised his arms, right hand holding on to the binoculars instead of letting them hang from his neck strap. Tommy's left hand shot out to jerk a button off Hollister's red-and-white shirt to get to the Luger nesting in a spring-clip armpit holster.

He dropped the clumsy ax and was pulling the German pistol free when Hollister brought his heavy ten-power binoculars crashing down on Tommy's skull.

Dazed though he was by the unexpected blow, the teenager maintained his stubborn grip on the Luger as he staggered backwards, his free hand managing to grab the neckstrap of the binoculars and prevent Hollister from raising them for a second clubbing blow, which

could knock him out completely.

As the neck strap jerked against the back of Hollister's skull it pulled the felon off balance. The two fell to the planked floor, Tommy Rockford slamming his shoulderblades onto the puncheons.

Stars dancing in front of his eyes, a black swirl of unconsciousness threatening to engulf him, K6ATX put all his strength into hanging onto the heavy-calibered hand gun. If Hollister succeeded in wrestling that from his grasp, it would be all over.

Hollister, in attempting to regain his feet so that he could straddle over his adversary and pin him to the puncheon floor until he had regained possession of the Luger, jerked upward and backward so violently that the binoculars neck strap broke, causing Hollister to fall backwards and be the first to regain his feet.

Fighting to keep his senses, Tommy got his finger on the trigger and swung the barrel of the Luger around to cover Hollister at point-blank range. The international art thief ignored Tommy's snarled command to spread-eagle himself against the wall. A man wanted in three continents on charges ranging from grand larceny to murder well knew the consequences of allowing this American youth to turn him over to the law. He decided to gamble on Tommy Rockford's being unable to bring himself to kill a man at close range.

Spinning on his heels, Duke Hollister vented a low, moaning sound of desperation as he plunged through the doorless opening and vanished from Tommy's view. Hollister had won his gamble. The Luger remained unfired. With the chips down, the youth from Santa Bonita could not summon the callous brand of brutality it took to trigger a fatal bullet into a fellow human.

Sick at the stomach, a rivulet of warm blood leaking from a scalp cut to trickle across his cheek and drip from his chin, Tommy Rockford forced himself to stand up. He uncapped the plastic bottle of water he carried on his belt and took a swig to clear his senses and relieve the mounting dehydration as the stifling heat sucked the vital juices from his body.

Rather than take a human life, K6ATX had allowed one of Europe's most-wanted criminals to slip free. Later the guilt might come, but for the moment he knew he had done his best and failed.

He did not know how long he leaned against the wall in the shade, waiting for his heart to quiet down. Finally, he picked up Hollister's binoculars and walked over to the window, surveying the scene below

through the ten-power lenses.

Despair coursed through Tommy's being as the glasses picked up Duke Hollister just as the master criminal slogged his way to the foot of the trail. There he was met by the cowboy-booted man Tommy recognized as the launch pilot, Slade. Obviously Slade had come in response to the radio message Hollister had shrewdly put on the air an instant before Tommy had launched his attack.

The two men turned to glance up at the cabin. They appeared to be arguing about what to do next. Finally, they both turned and zig-zagged through the crowded parking lot toward the river, the powerful glasses making them seem close enough to reach out and grab. They circled the big tour bus and, sprinting like Olympic athletes, headed straight for the river and the *Black Javelin*. An overpowering sense of frustration left a taste of gall on Rockford's tongue as he saw the escaping pair brace their shoulders against the prow of the launch to shove the hull back into the water. At the last instant they vaulted from the beach to the varnished teak foredeck of the launch. Slade scrambled around the windshield into the cockpit to switch on the inboard motor, which sent its throbbing roar up the ridge to where Tommy stood watching from the window of John D. Lee's ancient cabin. The propellor in reverse, the *Black Javelin* pulled away from the beach in a tight U-turn, circling a raft-load of tourists. Hollister was flinging himself down on a cushioned bench in the stern, a man near exhaustion, as Slade gunned the throttle.

Tommy Rockford heard the speedboat's engine respond as Slade shifted to forward, the boat seeming to leap out of the water as it sped through the dimpled eddies along the river's edge and knifed out into the swift-running ripples of the main stream.

Then, instead of swinging down-river toward Marble Canyon as expected, Slade spun the helm to point the black launch eastward, bucking the current in the direction of Glen Canyon Dam. Through the binoculars, Tommy could see the wind whipping Hollister's hair and shirt-sleeves, and the arching golden letters carved across the black-painted transom of the launch:

**BLACK JAVELIN
of
WAHWEAP MARINA, AZ**

Tommy groaned with despair. By the time he could make his way

back down to the river to report to a Park Ranger or to Doc Bonilla, his quarry would be miles away, forever beyond capture.

Tommy watched the speeding black launch until it disappeared around a bend of the river half a mile upstream, trailing a rooster-tail of spray in its frothing wake.

Doc Bonilla's elusive nemesis had again made good his escape.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Call of the Canyon

Soaking his pocket bandanna with water from his plastic bottle, Tommy Rockford cleaned the dirt and blood from his face and brushed the grime from his clothing as best he could. He had no desire to attract anyone's attention by his appearance, once he had reached the crowd of river runners down on the beach.

Of the many unanswered questions and unresolved decisions swirling around inside his head, top priority went to whether he should tell Doc Bonilla of his hand-to-hand brush with the Museum Bandit who had tracked his prey to this unlikely spot.

To do so, he realized, would be to completely destroy the old Spaniard's peace of mind and thereby ruin his enjoyment of the most important archeological project of his long and distinguished career. On the other hand, the speedboat gave Duke Hollister the capability of continuing his pursuit of Doc Bonilla into the heart of the Colorado River's gorge itself.

But why, Tommy wondered, had Hollister chosen to go *upstream* toward the dam, when he knew that the man he had marked for murder would be heading in the opposite direction?

Except for the Zeiss binoculars, the Luger pistol, and the cut on his scalp, Tommy Rockford might have cause to wonder if everything that had happened inside this roofless shack had been some kind of ghastly nightmare brought on by the heat.

But this was reality. He put the Luger in his back pocket and tied the broken strap together so he could carry the binocs around his neck. Then he headed out into the punishing heat and started slipping and sliding down the steep pathway leading to the river.

Reaching the parking lot, Tommy Rockford walked over to the tour bus and studied his reflection in the driver's exterior rear-vision mirror. Satisfied that his struggle with Hollister had not left any conspicuous marks which would cause his fellow river runners to ask questions, Tommy resumed his way toward the launch area where the *Titanic* was being readied to take off.

A uniformed Park Service dispatcher was going from group to group, checking off names on a clipboard and assigning put-in times. Launches had to be spaced in such a manner that they would not result in a cluster of boats moving downstream together, which could result in congestion at down-river campgrounds at day's end.

"Sir," K6ATX asked the official, "have you booked a river trip for a motor launch named the *Black Javelin* today?"

The dispatcher consulted his clipboard listings. "No—but I saw Tony Slade driving that particular launch upstream a few minutes ago, going fishing. Were you supposed to be aboard it, son?"

"No, sir. Does this Slade own the launch, do you know?"

The dispatcher shook his head. "No, he's just a pilot for a fleet of rental boats called Rainbow Javelins, home-based at Wahweap Marina over on Lake Powell near the dam. I see them almost daily. Rainbow comes from the speedboats being painted in different colors with names to match—*Scarlet Javelin*, *Emerald Javelin*, *White Javelin*, *Turquoise Javelin*, *Black Javelin*, and so on."

"What can you tell me about this Tony Slade guy?"

The dispatcher scowled curiously at Tommy.

"Slade? Like I told you, he's one of Rainbow's crew of pilots. He prefers exciting river charters, rather than just towing water-skiers around a millpond like most of the other pilots."

Tommy pressed on with his questions, "What's there to see upstream? Doesn't the river dead-end at the Dam?"

The dispatcher shrugged. "Well, compared to the Grand Canyon, there may not be much to see in the fifteen miles of river between here and the Dam, I suppose. But pleasure boats are allowed to run up to within a thousand feet of the powerhouse. People seem to enjoy looking at the Glen Canyon Bridge from below, and the trout fishing is great. Apparently the tourists find it worth what it costs to hire Slade and a trailer to bring the boats down here to Lee's Ferry for launching, because lots of them do it. Now if you'll excuse me, sonny, I have a few more rigs to check out."

K6ATX cleared his throat. "Sir, excuse me—but I have something serious to report to you. The passenger on Slade's black launch is a fugitive from justice. Duke Hollister, one of the most-wanted criminals in Europe. They call him the Museum Bandit. He knows I spotted him. That's why he took off in such a hurry."

The dispatcher smiled tolerantly, as if sure that this intense young man was living a fantasy. "You don't say! An international outlaw, eh? Well, you'll never catch him now. There's a dozen places between here and the dam where he could abandon the launch and take off into the Navajo Reservation. If Slade dropped him off at the pumping plant, for example, he could walk over to Page in less than an hour and be on a plane or a bus back to civilization."

"But sir, this man is a dangerous criminal! Surely you could radio the Park Service and have their patrol planes keep a lookout for the black motorboat on the river."

A frown of impatience crossed the dispatcher's face. "I'm sorry, kid, I've got work to do. I'm afraid your Museum Bandit is long gone. Excuse me. I can't waste any more time on him."

The dispatcher turned away, leaving Tommy seething with frustration. He was starting to walk over to where Cap'n Jolly was finishing his job of inflating the *Titanic*'s portside pontoon when he saw Dr. Ellwood Sixto coming toward him. In spite of the heat of the day he was wearing a long-sleeved shirt to go with his Chinese coolie-style straw hat.

"They sent me out looking for you, Tommy!" the Arizona official greeted him pleasantly. "Our skipper's principal headache seems to be clients who wander off and delay his departures. Say, that's a fine pair of binoculars you have there."

Tommy Rockford came to a fast decision. This professorial individual was Doc Bonilla's closest associate and trusted consultant on this treasure-hunting expedition. He would ask Dr. Sixto's advice—and abide by whatever it was.

"Dr. Sixto, are you aware of a man named Duke Hollister?"

The geologist looked startled. "Doc's Museum Bandit? Yes, I am."

"Well, these binoculars were hanging around Duke Hollister's neck an hour ago!" He reached in his hip pocket and tugged out the Luger pistol, which he had not shown the Park Service dispatcher for fear the officer would confiscate it, since firearms of any kind were

not permitted in the Grand Canyon. "And this is Duke Hollister's gun. Do you believe me? The dispatcher didn't. He condescended to listen like I was an autistic child or something."

A look akin to fear widened Sixto's eyes as he shrank back from the Luger in Tommy's hand.

"Tommy, you'll be in deep trouble if you're caught smuggling a handgun aboard the raft. It's against the law!"

"There's something I have to tell you, Dr. Sixto. I need your input. Should I tell Doc Bonilla that Hollister is actually on the river, trailing him? I'd appreciate your advice on this."

When he had finished telling Sixto about his violent encounter with the Museum Bandit up in the Lee cabin, the geologist from Phoenix showed by his serious demeanor that he was taking K6ATX's incredible narrative at its face value.

"Tommy, I advise you to withhold this information from Dr. Bonilla for the time being. It is highly unlikely that Hollister would risk pursuing us into the Canyon. And it would certainly destroy our friend's enjoyment of the expedition if he knew that a killer had shadowed him up here from Mexico City. Meanwhile, dispose of that pistol, Tommy. I suggest throwing it overboard—"

They were interrupted by a thunderous shout from Cap'n Jolly, "Hey, you two tenderfeet, get over here and help me shove this bologna boat into the water! I want to make Mile 38 before we tie up tonight. Camping spots are li'ble to be hard to come by."

As they started toward the *Titanic*, Tommy murmured, "Thanks a lot, sir. I'll postpone telling Doc what happened. We can play it by ear, one day at a time. But I don't mind telling you, I'm scared."

Doc Bonilla and the two Indian bodyguards had made themselves a nest among the drybags near the prow of the raft. Whitey Rosegart, the cook, was winding up the stowage of his refrigerated supplies in the wooden chests amidships.

Cap'n Jolly, the recovered TB patient and former university professor now posing as a rough-and-ready old river rat, tossed Tommy a bright-orange life jacket with the comment, "You buckle it on same as a vest, and you'll wear it at all times when we're on the water, no exceptions. Understand, kid? It's a Coast Guard regulation I have to enforce to the letter or lose my river license. You don't have to wear it when we're on land."

"Aye aye, sir," Tommy laughed, hoping he had concealed the

mounting dislike he felt for the tobacco-chewing skipper. When he had buckled the life jacket snug, Cap'n Jolly looking on with a critical eye, Tommy said "What next, Captain?"

"We're shovin' this tub off the sand bank and getting our show on the road, that's what. Come on, Sixto—help push!"

The three men bent their shoulders to the horn-shaped ends of the pontoons and shoved. A moment later they were hopping aboard as the craft floated free, with Whitey Rosegart manning the outboard motor, used for steering purposes in the rapids and to double the raft's cruising speed over the river's normal current.

This moment of becoming waterborne marked the start of their Grand Canyon adventure. Tommy Rockford was more than ever aware of a sense of history repeating itself, realizing that this very spot, four centuries ago, was where a little band of steel-helmeted Spanish soldiers under the command of Captain Juan Vicente Ventura, closely pursued by a band of bloodthirsty Aztec warriors, had launched their makeshift raft, towed by four packmules whose cargo of Aztec gold had been lashed securely aboard.

The *conquistadores* and Friar Salazar on that long-ago day numbered exactly the same as today's *Titanic* party. They had wanted only to cross the river, delaying the Indian pursuit and continuing their flight back to Mexico. Instead their mules had drowned and their treasure-laden raft had been sucked into the maw of this most awesome of river gorges. According to Doc Bonilla, only Friar Salazar had emerged from the Grand Canyon alive.

Major Powell and his intrepid American crew, who had started their history-making river run of 1869 on the Green River tributary up in Wyoming, had floated past this lonely spot. Unlike today's river-runners, Powell and his men had not known whether any bend of the Colorado River might confront them with a thundering vertical waterfall which could dash them into eternity. It took rare Yankee courage to face three hundred miles of the unknown.

Tommy pulled his thoughts back to the present, his eyes fixed on the cliff-girt corridor upstream where Duke Hollister and pilot Tony Slade had driven the *Black Javelin* out of sight.

He felt the *Titanic* respond to the thrust of the motor's screw as it surged out into the swift-flowing current in midstream, gliding toward the white-capped Paria River riffle to westward.

The thrill of anticipation Tommy was feeling now had been

experienced by countless adventurers before him, for few adventurers can resist the siren call of the Grand Canyon. In K6ATX's case, there was an added feeling of apprehension to counteract the euphoric flow of adrenalin in his bloodstream.

Like the Spanish *soldados* and the Powell party before him, Tommy Rockford was also wondering if violent death might be awaiting Doc Bonilla's little party of modern-day explorers as they set out to defy an ancient Aztec curse.

It was too late to turn back now. Once caught in the inexorable grip of the current, they were irrevocably committed to whatever fate held in store for them as the ever-rising walls of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado closed in to embrace them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Salazar Parchment

Anyone privileged to enjoy the unique thrill of running the Colorado River rapids inside the Grand Canyon invariably experiences a sense of release from the bondage and rat-race anxieties of society from their first hour on the river.

There is something unreal, almost narcotic about the swishing whisper of the cold river current under the rubber pontoons, the tranquillity of gliding down a rushing river between enormous red and gold walls of stone which grow higher with each passing mile, the muffled purr of the outboard motor humming a sedative lullaby.

Seasoned travelers agree the unforgettable sensations are renewed no matter how many times one casts off from the desolate beach at Lee's Ferry. But for Tommy Rockford on this hot June morning, what should have been indescribable joy at the start of Doc Bonilla's mystery run down the Grand Canyon of the Colorado was blunted by a numbing apprehension that terror lay just under the surface, waiting from one moment to the next to strike.

There was ample reason for his nerves to be tied up in knots. K6ATX was sure that Duke Hollister would follow them into the throat of the 280-mile-long gorge. The Museum Bandit, impelled by astrologers and fortune-tellers, would pursue his blind quest for vengeance until he got within rifle range of Doc Bonilla. The conviction that this was so was enough to account for the pallor which bleached Tommy's sun-bronzed face.

Bobbing through the white-capped riffles below the mouth of the Paria River, Tommy thought of how the Spaniards must have felt on that long ago morning after they had followed the Paria to the "River

of Blood." They, too, were being pursued by an implacable enemy bent on massacring them and recovering the very same gold Doc Bonilla hoped to return to Mexico.

The other six persons aboard the *Titanic* raft were all reveling in the sheer joy of adventure awaiting them, although Doc Sixto injected a false note into the excitement of the day by delivering an erudite lecture on why everyone should emulate him in wearing a straw hat and long-sleeved shirt as a shield against skin cancer caused by too much exposure to the sun's violet rays.

The only one who did not show annoyance at Sixto's preaching was the simple-minded cook, Whitey Rosegart, who busied himself by battening down the lids of his long ice chests amidships. These held his frozen steaks, loaves of bread, boxes of fresh vegetables, apples and oranges and eggs, dry cereals and the makings of flapjacks for hot breakfasts to come.

An identical wooden chest on the starboard side of the raft carried cooking utensils. Other watertight crates carried the portable stove, a Porta-potty to conform to the Park Service's new sanitation regulations regarding waste disposal, and collapsible tables for the on-shore commissary. The lids of the two largest chests converted into seats for use of the passengers when they tired of straddling the pontoons, braving the cold spray which tempered the fierce heat of the late-June sun.

Doc Bonilla had made himself comfortable on a cushion of drybags in the fore part of the raft, with Castor and Pollux crouched at his either elbow, flint-black eyes studying the long sweep of the Grand Canyon unfolding before them.

Dr. Sixto, whose cancer-prevention lecture had fallen on deaf ears, knew from past experience that the rearmost seats were the driest when the going got wet in the larger rapids. He had accordingly staked out a spot for himself near the stern, where Cap'n Jolly kept his lashed-down rows of red jerry cans containing reserve outboard motor fuel.

For his part, Tommy Rockford found a seat on the first-aid box nearest the pilot's well, where Cap'n Jolly stood masticating his tobacco cud, one fist on the rubber handle of the tiller bar, squinted eyes on the river ahead. With the added thrust of the motor's propeller, the *Titanic* was now cruising at approximately eight to ten miles an hour, double the river flow, but slightly below the speed the Spaniards had

made four centuries ago on their floating log, when the River of Blood had sluiced down its rocky channel without impedances from such man-made objects as Glen Canyon Dam.

"Tommy," Cap'n Jolly startled K6ATX out of his brooding reverie, "you're spendin' all your time lookin' back upstream—when the perty scenery is unfoldin' ahead of us. Is it because you're like the goose who flew backwards 'cause he wanted to see where he had been instead of where he was goin'? Or is it that you find my pretty face all that scenic?"

Tommy smiled wanly, aware that he indeed had been subconsciously scanning their wake in case Duke Hollister's black launch suddenly appeared behind them. "I guess staring into the sun glare on the water ahead was hurting my eyes, Cap'n. Any time now, I'll probably stretch out on a pontoon and grab some shut-eye. I guess I was too excited to sleep much last night."

Cap'n Jolly grunted as he squirted an amber stream of tobacco into the churning wake. "Better lash yourself down if you do any dozin' on the pontoon, son. You fall overboard, you'll wake up in a hurry, I g'arantee you that. Water's forty-five degrees cold and runs around eighty-five feet deep here comin' into Marble Canyon."

Twisting around to face forwards, Tommy saw the lacy steel arch of the Navajo Bridge nearly five hundred feet overhead, a spidery silhouette etched against an enamel-blue Arizona sky.

"How come the water's so darned cold?" Tommy asked. "I would expect it after the snow melt, but this is June twenty-sixth."

Cap'n Jones gestured over his shoulder. "Blame it on that hod-dangled dam the Bureau of Reclamation threw across the river. The bureaucrats who run Glen Canyon Dam control the water that flows into the river, see? They draw that water from the *bottom* of Lake Powell, water that never has a chance to warm up. It's an abomination unto the good Lord, Tommy, that's what that dam is."

Sensing that the skipper was about to launch into another of his tirades against the government, Tommy moved to the front of the raft, pausing a moment to watch Whitey the cook as he filled a wide-mesh net sack with assorted cans of beer and soft drinks and tossed it overboard, fastened by a rope to the raft. This kept the beverages ice-cold despite the summer heat which could turn the bottom of the Grand Canyon into a bakeoven this time of year.

Up front, Doc Bonilla was lifting his rich baritone voice in the

plaintive songs of his native Spain, *La Golondrina* and *La Paloma*, followed by Tommy's mother's favorites from Tin Pan Alley, *In a Little Spanish Town* and *Amapola*. Tommy had never seen EA7WK appear so carefree and childishly enraptured with life. It put a sickish sensation in the pit of his stomach to know that he could destroy that bubbling joy in a single instant, just by letting Doc know that Duke Hollister had been at Lee's Ferry only an hour ago.

"What should I do?" he asked himself for the hundredth time. "It won't protect Doc from being cut down by a sniper's bullet at any bend of the river, knowing his killer is on the river too. But he has to know, so he can abort the trip if he chooses to..."

Ellwood Sixto, who had seemed to be laboring under a sense of guilt that he had been sent along as excess baggage to represent the State of Arizona on Dr. Bonilla's treasure hunt, appointed himself the expedition's official lecturer on Grand Canyon geology, immediately after the raft made its bouncing, spray-drenched passage of their first major white water, Badger Creek Rapid, at Mile 8. Sixto began in a droning, college-classroom monotone:

"That beautiful formation you noticed after we left Lee's Ferry was the Toroweap Strata, turning into Coconino Sandstone as we entered so-called Marble Canyon. What you're seeing now is Hermit Shale, where you can find million-year-old fern fossils and giant reptile tracks petrified into what was once oozing mud—"

Tommy Rockford, engrossed in his own fears and worries for the safety of his Spanish host, found himself tuning out Dr. Sixto's pedantic offering. The man knew his geology, and there was no denying that in all the world no greater geological showcase existed than the mile-deep Grand Canyon. But today all K6ATX could concentrate on was trying to guess when, if, or where Duke Hollister was going to strike.

If the assassination of Doc Bonilla was Hollister's reason for being at Lee's Ferry this morning, the attack could come at any time, day or night. But if Hollister had somehow gotten wind of Aztec gold being the true object of Dr. Bonilla's mission, the master thief would probably postpone his vengeance slaying until the treasure had been located, loot for his picking.

Lost in a vacuum of his own thoughts, Tommy gave little attention to the rapids which he ticked off one by one on the pages of his waterproof river map book of the Grand Canyon: Sheer Wall, House

Rock, Redneck, North Canyon, Indian Dick, Cave Springs.

Sixto and Bonilla got their cameras out of their ammo boxes when they reached Vasey's Paradise at Mile 32. Here was an oasis of moss and ferns beneath two filmy waterfalls leaking from cracks in the stratified cliff wall, named for a botanist friend by Major Powell on his expedition of 1869.

Cap'n Jolly landed at a nearby beach called South Canyon, where Whitey served sandwiches, coffee and cold watermelon in a spectacular picnic setting at the base of a 3,000-foot cliff. Back on the raft and around a horseshoe bend at Mile 33, they marveled at the vast sandpile forming an amphitheater under an overhanging scarp of rust-colored rock known as Redwall Cavern, so spacious that Major Powell had estimated 50,000 people could take shelter under its lithic roof at one time. Modern Park Service rangers had cut the estimate to ten thousand, still an impressive figure.

The sun had set under the high rims long before they made their first overnight stop at Mile 38 Campsite, a lonely, unnamed sandspit overgrown with tamarisk scrub. Nearby the cliffs showed the huge test-holes the Bureau of Reclamation had drilled in the 1960s for the proposed Marble Canyon Dam, which would have converted the upper Grand Canyon into another stagnant lake. That unthinkable abomination had been canceled by outraged public opinion, led by California's Sierra Club, an environmental organization Tommy had belonged to and believed in since boyhood.

While they were off-loading their cooking and bedding supplies in bucket-brigade fashion, two big rafts glided past in tandem, the happy river runners in their bright red-orange lifejackets singing a tavern drinking song, waving and shouting at Doc Bonilla's party on shore in joyous camaraderie.

Cap'n Jolly did not let the incident pass without grumbling: "Fifteen thousand noisy dudes are runnin' this river ever' summer. There are barely enough sandy spots left to accommodate the campers durin' the peak season. And with no more silt comin' down the river since they put up that hornswoggled concrete wall in Glen Canyon, the day will come, in your kids' lifetime mind you, when all these beaches will be eroded away with no more sand comin' down to replenish 'em. Civilization stinks!"

By the waning twilight the seven river runners removed sleeping bags from rubber containers, and pegged down their plastic

groundsheets on the sand at widely separated places amid the rocks and brush. As an indigo dusk gathered, the canyon walls boomed with echos set up by Cap'n Jolly's stentorian, "Come an' get it!" calling them down to the landing area to devour their first supper under the stars—beefsteak and potatoes with fresh vegetable salad, followed by steaming coffee and hot apple pie laced with cinnamon.

Open campfires no longer being permitted by the Park Service, campers were deprived of the traditional talk fests around the crackling flames. But before the group scattered for the night, Doc Bonilla came over to where the diners were scalding their eating utensils and trays in deep pans provided by Whitey. He clapped his hands for attention. When all was quiet he said, "*Amigos*, the time has come for me to share something of great importance with you. You are all aware that my life has been threatened by an outlaw named Duke Hollister, whom I have reason to believe followed me as far as Mexico City. It was because of that threat that the Mexican government assigned two bodyguards to accompany me on this expedition to Arizona."

Castor and Pollux, aware that the attention of the group had turned on them, scowled at each other without comprehension, victims of the language barrier. Doc Bonilla continued in English, "Although for the first time in weeks I feel secure from the threat of Duke Hollister, here in the depths of this magnificent canyon, in case anything should happen to me I would want you to know about an antique art object I wear around my neck asleep or awake."

As he spoke, Dr. Bonilla was pawing under his camouflage jumpsuit to loop a finger around a sturdy gold chain encircling his neck. The chain was attached to a large pendant of some sort, the bulge of which Tommy had already noticed on the bus ride up from Flagstaff this morning, but had assumed it was a concealed weapon.

Moving closer to Whitey's Coleman lantern, Dr. Bonilla pulled the gold chain over his ears and head and held the attached pendant to the light, everyone crowding in for a closer look.

At first Tommy thought the pendant was a flashlight, until he realized it was a bone encrusted with bits of turquoise, agate, black obsidian and other stones, imbedded in a tar-like substance. Dr. Sixto, bending down for a closer look, gave a gasp of admiration. "That looks like Aztec art work! Very old!"

Dr. Bonilla nodded. The heavily wrought gold chain was threaded through holes drilled in the upper end of the hollow bone; the lower

end had a jeweled stopper-like plug which the Spanish archeologist now proceeded to twist out like a cork from a bottle.

"This was the handle of an Aztec ceremonial dagger, used by the high priest Ozar to cut out the hearts of human sacrifices at the altar of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent god," Dr. Bonilla explained, twisting a finger into the hollow bone handle. "The black obsidian blade is broken off short, as you see, but during the 1985 earthquake, which collapsed the Museum for Aztec Studies in Mexico City, this cap came loose. Inside the handle was found this rolled-up scroll! Amigos, *you are about to see the 1541 Parchment of Friar Salazar!* I value it as if it were the Dead Sea Scrolls!"

With these words, Bonilla pulled forth a tightly rolled scroll of paper-thin sheepskin and held the translucent vellum up to the white glare of the Coleman lantern. Unrolling it, he revealed lines of faded sepia ink inscribed there by the quill pen of a Majorcan scribe who had been dead more than four centuries. Everyone gathered about the lantern knew that the archaic Spanish writing held the secret of a treasure cave somewhere here in the Grand Canyon, a cave which was the objective of this rafting expedition.

"It is important that I make all of you aware of this precious 'elic,'" Dr. Bonilla went on, carefully restoring the parchment to its case, capping it, looping the heavy gold chain back around his neck, and returning the Aztec pendant back under his shirt. "Because if any misfortune should befall me on this expedition, may Señor Dios forbid, it is imperative that this priceless artifact be returned to the Museum of Aztec Studies in Mexico City where it has been archived these many years."

"We solemnly vow to carry out your wishes," Dr. Sixto murmured piously. "May heaven forbid such a need will ever arise."

"Shucks, Doc," Cap'n Jolly commented, "nothin's goin' to happen to you. Nobody on my *Titanic* trips ever got hurt yet."

"Doc," Tommy said, "pardon me for saying this, but shouldn't you have locked this parchment in a bank vault back in Flagstaff?"

Doc Bonilla shook his head. "I insisted on keeping personal custody of the scroll, Tomás. The only way anyone could get it would be to kill me first—and even then, I believe I am the only person living who can translate Friar Salazar's message."

The meeting ended on that note, everyone bidding Antonio Bonilla good night and scattering to the comfort of their own bedrolls, knowing

that Cap'n Jolly would be rousing them at day's first light tomorrow. Their crusty skipper wanted to cover at least forty miles before pitching another camp tomorrow night.

Not feeling sleepy, Tommy decided to do a little star-gazing with Hollister's ten-power night glasses. Down in this deep fissure in the Kaibab Plateau, with the darkness as thick as paint, ideal conditions existed for studying the stars which powdered the strip of sky visible between the lofty rimrocks of the inner gorge. And while he was at it, he might as well take his two-meter ham rig along and see what might be on the air waves tonight.

He was playing his flashlight beam on his ammo box to get his binocs and ICOM hand-held transceiver when Cap'n Jolly spoke out of the darkness, "No use takin' the radio, kid. We're down in a deep hole. The only radio communication out o' the Grand Canyon is boat-to-air, which we are required by law to carry in case of emergency. But there's no airplanes around this time of night."

"I know there is no such thing as a Grand Canyon QSO per se," Tommy said, tucking the transceiver into the roomy pocket of the Patagonia windbreaker he had donned to keep off the evening chill. "But I might copy some Morse code being bounced off a satellite. We radio hams have an OSCAR passing overhead every 98 minutes with a transponder that puts out a downlink signal at around 145.9 MHz."

"OSCAR flying overhead? That's a new one on me."

"Sorry—I forgot you weren't a ham yourself. OSCAR is an acronym meaning Orbiting Satellite Carrying Amateur Radio."

Cap'n Jolly laughed skeptically. "Well, I hope your OSCAR won't dump in the Grand Canyon. One of the great blessings of river running is that for a few days you're out of touch with TV and radio, bad-news broadcasts and rock 'n' roll. Good luck."

Tommy walked down to the edge of the river and seated himself on a slab of gneiss. Suddenly an alien sound reached his ears from up-river—a chorus of voices harmonizing *Bool-a bool-a* and other college songs.

Twinkling gas lights drifted around the bend, dragging along fence-picket reflections. Through the binoculars Rockford made out a pair of thirty-foot rafts lashed side by side, making a starlight cruise on their way to some campground farther down-river.

Behind the twin boats Tommy's binocs picked up a pair of running

lights rapidly overtaking the vocalizing expeditioneers. One red, one green. A power boat, making perhaps twenty knots. The snarl of its motor was becoming audible above a barbershop chorus of the *Whiffenpoof Song*.

The launch overtook the rafts. In passing it came not a hundred feet from the outthrust of rock where Tommy sat watching through Hollister's German binoculars.

Two men were huddled behind the launch's spray-spattered cockpit windshield. A moment later they disappeared, bucking and plunging into the churning waves of a minor rapid. The arch of gold letters of the power boat's name carved across the transom had been plainly readable by the lights carried on the big rafts.

Tommy's heart almost stopped beating as he whispered the name: "*Black Javelin!*"

CHAPTER NINE

A Burial at Midnight

The enticing aroma of coffee and Cap'n Jolly's bellowed "Come an' get it!" roused Tommy Rockford from a tormented night's sleep. Half a mile overhead, dawn light was staining the lofty rimrocks with crimson and gold while the terraced cliffs and talus slopes deeper in the Canyon still lay in the blue-black shadows of night.

Scrambling out of the sweat suit he wore in lieu of pajamas and donning his Cal Tech jersey and Levis, adding a windbreaker to cut the daybreak chill, K6ATX discovered that all but one of the expedition members had already picked up their breakfast trays down by the cook table. The exception was Doc Bonilla, who was kneeling at the river's edge washing his face in the frigid water.

It would be one of the most difficult things he had ever been called upon to do, but Tommy knew he had to break the bad news to Bonilla that Hollister was now ahead of them down-canyon, lying in wait for his target.

The danger of the situation, Tommy knew, might persuade Bonilla to abort the expedition day after tomorrow, when they reached Phantom Ranch at Mile 88. That was where the Kaibab and Bright Angel Trails zigzagged up to Grand Canyon Village and El Tovar Hotel on the South Rim. Beyond Phantom Ranch there was no easy way out of the canyon short of Diamond Creek, 137 miles downstream.

Given this opportunity to catch Doc Bonilla out of earshot of the others, Tommy knew he had no excuse to further postpone the bad news. Feeling like a man going to his own execution, K6ATX trudged down the sandy slope with his towel and cake of biodegradable soap, as if to join the old Spaniard at his ablutions.

"*Buenos días, Tomás!*" The archeologist greeted him jovially, hastily donning his eye patch. "A good morning to be alive, *no es verdad?*" Bonilla's voice trailed off, sensing from the solemn expression on Tommy's face that something was wrong. "*Que es?*"

"Doc," Tommy responded bleakly, "I have the worst possible news . . ." and he blurted out his story—that Duke Hollister had not only shown up at Lee's Ferry, but had passed their camp aboard the *Black Javelin* last night. He wound up his confession by saying "I wouldn't blame you a bit if you wanted to call off the expedition when we get to the Bright Angel bridge, knowing a sniper may be waiting for you at any bend of the river. Ozar's Aztec gold isn't worth sacrificing your own life, Doc."

Doc Bonilla took the double dose of bad news with greater aplomb than Tommy had expected was possible. The oldster's face had paled and he had clutched his fists tightly to keep his tremor from showing, but when K6ATX had finished, Doc Bonilla squared his shoulders and his jaw took on a resolute thrust.

"What would you want me to do, Tomás?"

"Speaking selfishly, I would continue the expedition. But I am not the target that will come into the crosshairs of Hollister's telescopic sight, Doc. I think the risk is too great—for you."

"Abandon what may be the highlight of my whole career, Tomás? Never! But from this moment forward I will carry a firearm. If Hollister has got wind of the true objective of this expedition, he knows he could never find that Aztec cache without my help, so I don't think he would shoot me from ambush. If avenging my role in putting his brother behind bars . . . that is a risk I'll just have to live with, here on the Colorado River as I have done on the *paseos* of Seville. My fate is in the hands of Señor Dios. I trust in Him."

As they walked up from the river to where the others had lined up for breakfast, Doc Bonilla said, "I will alert Castor and Pollux that Hollister is now in the Canyon below us. But not the Capitan or Señor Sixto. Both men are indispensable to the success of my venture—the Capitan for being river-wise, and Sixto for his general knowledge of the canyon. Plus his being the official representative of the State of Arizona who could withdraw my archeological privileges if he so ordered, and who can bring in the State Troopers if we find the gold. But if they knew about Hollister they might panic and want to terminate the expedition."

Tommy nodded his approval. He did not mention that he had already taken Dr. Sixto into his confidence regarding Hollister.

"One last thing," the Spaniard added. "Keep your two-meter rig near you at all times, as I will keep mine. It will enable us to communicate in emergency without the others being able to listen."

When Doc Bonilla presented himself at the commissary breakfast for his bacon and eggs, cold melon, fresh toast and hot coffee, he was wearing a .357 Magnum pistol in a holster at his hip. At sight of the weapon, Cap'n Jolly flew into a rage.

"Hand over that gun, Doc! No man carries a firearm on my boat. I would lose my river license if I permitted it. I wasn't aware you had smuggled it aboard yesterday or I would have confiscated it."

The Spaniard smiled and went on dishing food into his stainless steel tray.

"I have reason to believe my life is in personal danger on this trip, Capitan. So do the Mexican federal agencies who employ me. That is why they assigned these two bodyguards for my protection. I understand your position, Capitan, but I intend to keep this gun on my person at all times."

Tommy sensed that real trouble was brewing. The animosity that had lurked just below the surface between Bonilla and Cap'n Jolly at the Flagstaff motel was out in the open now. In addition, Tommy had to wonder why was Cap'n Jolly so upset over Bonilla's carrying a sidearm? Was it because he was working for Duke Hollister, and had orders to not let anyone aboard the *Titanic* be armed?

"You will hand over that weapon," the skipper stormed, "or I will clap you in irons and turn you over to the Park Rangers when we get to Phantom Ranch. It is a violation of federal law for a river raft passenger to transport a firearm into the Canyon."

Doc Bonilla carefully laid his breakfast tray upon a handy rock. He unbuttoned his jumpsuit to reveal a money belt worn next to his stomach. From one of the belt's zippered compartments he drew out three plastic cards, which he handed to Cap'n Jolly.

"One *tarjeta* authorizes me to carry a concealed weapon into Grand Canyon National Park, countersigned by your Secretary of the Interior," Dr. Bonilla said calmly. "Another is a permit from the Governor of Arizona, issued as a courtesy to the Presidente of Mexico. The third is a permit from the Sheriff of Coconino County. You cannot possibly be held liable for my actions, Capitan."

Cap'n Jolly's ruddy face turned bone-white with anger. "I got to remind you I am the captain of this here raft and my word is law, Doc! And my law is, no hand guns. Except your two Injun guards, who have special permission from the State Department, so I can't help that. Hand over the gun."

Dr. Bonilla restored the credential cards to his money belt. Then he picked up his tray and looked around for a place to seat himself while he ate breakfast.

"You force me to remind you, sir," he told the veteran river rat, "that you are my employee, well paid I might add, and that you are obliged to yield to my authority if the occasion arises. We will not argue this matter further . . . The iced cantalope is *muy sabroso*, Señor Rosegart. Your menus never cease to delight me."

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The group broke camp, flattening their empty cans with a mallet and packing them into a recycling sack, reloading their gear aboard the *Titanic*, and were under way before full daylight had tempered the chill in the depths of the canyon.

The river was like glass, dimpled with eddies and whirlpools near the sheer rock cliffs, with the medium-sized President Harding Rapid giving them an unwanted showerbath six miles downstream, reminding them that the velvet paws of the river concealed potent claws.

For Tommy Rockford, each new bend of the river brought a new tingle of suspense, a fresh tightening of stomach muscles, wondering whether every clump of brush clinging to a sandy beach or every fissure in the rock wall might be concealing the Museum Bandit and his telescopic-sighted rifle.

Castor and Pollux betrayed by their own increased vigilance that Bonilla had warned his two bodyguards to be on the lookout for the *Black Javelin* and its two occupants.

Passing Nankoweap Rapids at Mile 52 later in the morning—Grand Canyon mileages were based on Mile Zero at Lee's Ferry—Dr. Sixto pointed out a series of black windowlike openings in a cliff dwelling some 500 feet above the river. There the Ancient Ones, the Anasazi, had sorted grain from cultivated fields down on the Nankoweap Delta. Sight of the thousand-year-old Indian granaries seemed to make Doc Bonilla forget his own nervous tension. Captain Ventura's gold cache might well be concealed behind similar man-made

windows at their destination, the Cave of Skeletons.

The *Titanic* tied up for a lunch break at a narrow strip of beach on the north bank opposite Kwagunt Rapid. During the hour ashore several boatloads of river runners, some in oared wooden dories and kayaks, put on a lively show as they ran the white-water chutes.

Doc Bonilla, once he had made sure that a black launch was not among them, returned to a study of his translations of Friar Salazar's parchment. Tommy overheard his comment to Cap'n Jolly, "The first landmark the *conquistadores* mention is what the friar calls a large tributary stream entering the river from 'out of the sunrise.' Does that jibe with your knowledge, Capitan?"

Cap'n Jolly's jet of tobacco juice scored a bullseye on a scorpion which had scuttled a little too close to his boots. "Sure does," he replied. "That'll be the Little Colorado River. Rises in the Green Mountain country, half-way down the Arizona-New Mex border. Spills into the Colorado about five miles below here. And that's where this clear water will end, Doc. Beyond the Little Colorado, the river runs red as rust all the way to Hoover Dam."

Exactly as Friar Salazar had described and as Cap'n Jolly had confirmed, the confluence of the Little Colorado and the main river came into view shortly after resuming their run. And as Cap'n Jolly had said, below the Little Colorado's sandbar island the silt-laden river took on the hue of oiled saddle leather.

Fear of a Hollister ambush trap seemed the farthest thing from Doc Bonilla's mind as he continued perusing his notes on the Salazar parchment. "We should be coming up shortly with the Indian Salt Mines, shouldn't we? *La Mina de sol de los Indios?*"

For answer, Cap'n Jolly cut off the motor so the raft could float with the current as he pointed to the left bank, where the tan Tapeats Sandstone cliff was streaked with curtains of white sodium chloride seepage, pure table salt. Behind a hedge of lacy mesquites, at the very base of the vertical rock wall, they saw a black horizontal opening, about six feet high and a hundred yards long. The ceiling and floor of the cavity bristled with snow-white stalactites and stalagmites of salt, obviously aeons old.

"The Indians have been getting their salt here for ten thousand years," Ellwood Sixto informed them. "In fact the Hopis still consider this to be a sacred place."

"And so does the US Park Service," complained Cap'n Jolly,

restarting the motor. "They've made the mine out of bounds for us river runners, else I'd pull over an' let you explore the caves."

During the afternoon Tommy and the two Indian bodyguards maintained a constant watchout for Hollister and his *Black Javelin*. Tommy had not been under such nervous tension since his capture by the smuggler Black Jack Gorin up in Washington State the previous year, when escape had seemed impossible.*

Doc Bonilla was totally preoccupied discussing the geology of the canyon with Dr. Sixto. With each passing mile the geologist classified the ever-changing rock layers into the three categories in which they belonged, sedimentary, igneous and metamorphic, interspersed with jawbreaking terms Tommy vaguely remembered from his high school geology—Cainozoic, Mesozoic, Paleozoic, Proterozoic, Archean, Hadean.

Tommy was grateful that his elderly Spanish friend had such a diversion to take his mind off the very real chance of winding up a target of an ambush bullet.

The sweltering summer heat settled in the hazy pit of the Grand Canyon like liquid fire, causing everyone aboard to strip to their shorts and rub on quantities of suntan lotion—with one exception. The eccentric Dr. Sixto continued to wear his long-sleeved shirt and coolie hat.

"Better suffer a little heat," he responded indignantly to Cap'n Jolly's rebuking laughter, "than run the risk of skin cancer. Tan yourself to a crisp and die prematurely. It is not my concern."

The day settled into a routine of river floating and rapid running, the peace and quiet marred only by the occasional fly-over of sightseeing helicopters and private planes out of Las Vegas. By late afternoon a brisk breeze tempered the heat, but driving sand was stinging their faces as they sloughed and bounced through Nevills Rapid at Mile 76. One more mile, and Cap'n Jolly suddenly grounded his raft on a broad sandy shelf at the mouth of Red Canyon opposite Hance Rapid, one of the canyon's 10-rated cataracts.

"We're tyin' up an hour earlier than I'd prefer," the skipper explained as he tossed the mooring lines ashore to Whitey Rosegart, who secured them to large boulders near the water's edge. "That's

*See CQ GHOST SHIP! published 1985 by ARRL.

because we got some real white water between us and Phantom Ranch landing tomorrow—Hance here, and Sockdolager, Grapevine, Zoraster. If we ran those babies while we're buckin' this head wind, we'd be as cold and wet from flyin' spray as a pack o' drowned rats. No use punishin' ourselves."

Two large rafting parties had river guides who made the same decision to end their day's run at Mile 77: Las Vegas-based Georgina Black's and Hatcher Expeditions out of Vernal, Utah. They dumped another sixty people onto tonight's restricted camp space.

After supper the new arrivals intermixed to form a gregarious and noisy crowd of merrymakers. Some gung-ho tourist—every group had one—organized a program of impromptu riverside entertainment under the stars—skits by lantern light, singalongs, and solos by musical river runners who had brought along stringed instruments and an accordion.

Cap'n Jolly was profane in his disgust, for he shared Tommy Rockford's view that the haunting charm of the Colorado River after dark was spoiled by man-made noise pollution, however musical.

Elderly Georgina Black, the veteran river guide who had first introduced war-surplus rubber rafts and bridge pontoon "G-rigs" to the Grand Canyon rapids on a commercial basis in 1954, came over to the *Titanic*'s camp at dusk to personally invite Rogers' River Rats to join the fun. To Tommy Rockford's astonishment, the first to accept was Doc Bonilla, who volunteered to perform his repertoire of parlor magic tricks and lead a singalong. But after all, Tommy reminded himself, on the intercontinental ham radio scene EA7WK was known for being a gregarious story-teller and stand-up comic in several languages besides his native Castillian Spanish.

Cap'n Jolly, in a grumpier mood than usual ever since Doc Bonilla had defied orders to remove his sidearm, unrolled his sleeping bag on the deck of the *Titanic* as usual and turned in early. Tommy chose to join the others at their neighbors' jamboree.

The smash hit of the evening proved to be a trio introduced by the emcee as "The Deep South Doctors"—a veterinary from Florida who played an acoustic guitar, a retired family doctor from New Orleans with his banjo, and Doc Bonilla, beating time with two rib bones "who qualifies as a Southerner because he's from the south of Spain. All requests will be honored with the exception of *Marching Through Georgia* and any lyrics containing the word Yankee."

Despite consuming numerous cups of strong coffee courtesy of the Hatcher Expeditions' five-gallon urn, around ten o'clock Doc Bonilla complained of fatigue and drowsiness and reluctantly left the festivities just when they were building to a noisy climax.

Half an hour later Dr. Sixto and Tommy Rockford retired to their own campsites. Tommy noticed that Castor and Pollux had pitched their bedrolls in a buffer zone between the *Titanic* camp area and the two larger groups, making sure no hostile visitors approached Dr. Bonilla during the night.

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K6ATX was awakened shortly after midnight by gusts of wind whipping his groundsheet and peppering his face with flying sand. He crawled out of his sleeping bag and began groping for rocks to weight down the edges of the plastic tarp. He was thus engaged when, in a lull of comparative silence when the wind carried the awesome thunder of Hance Rapid away from his ears, an alien sound penetrated his drowsiness.

It came from the other side of a massive boulder behind which Tommy had spread his sleeping bag to shield him from the sand-laden wind—a gritty sound like someone digging in the gravel nearby.

Out of curiosity, Tommy stepped around the edge of the boulder to investigate—and stopped short when he caught sight of a dark-clad figure some twenty feet away, down on his knees digging a hole near the river's edge, using a short-handled shovel such as river cooks carried to level off ground for table legs.

Tommy was in the act of returning to bed when he saw the shoveler placing a rectangular white object into the excavation, an object which resembled a tiny white coffin. He then carefully filled in the hole, leveled it off with the shovel blade, and marked the spot by pounding a stick of weather-bleached driftwood into the sand. His midnight burial rites completed, the digger picked up his shovel and melted into the night.

Puzzled, but too sleepy to investigate, K6ATX crawled back into his warm sleeping bag. But the mystery of what he had just witnessed kept him awake. Why would anyone bury something in the middle of the night? Why mark it with a stick, unless he or someone else planned to come back for it later? With nearly seventy people camped on this sandbar tonight, there was no point in trying to figure out who

the midnight shoveler might have been.

"Might as well do some digging of my own," Tommy decided, and reluctantly crawled out into the cold night wind again. Rounding the boulder, he walked over to the driftwood stake, pulled it out and carefully laid it aside, and began pawing into the sand and gravel like a dog uncovering a bone.

Less than a foot below the surface, Tommy's fingers encountered the square metal surfaces of the miniature casket. Tucking the metal box under his arm, K6ATX crept back behind the boulder out of the wind and turned on his pocket flashlight.

The exhumed object was a watertight ammo box, identical to those issued to every river runner as a receptacle to store their cameras, eye glasses, radios and other fragile objects which could be damaged if they got drenched going through a rapid. This box, however, did not carry the customary name and number; someone had stripped off the identification tape.

Opening the ammo box, Tommy Rockford found that it contained an object wrapped in a Ziploc plastic bag. He rested the tiny penlight on the hinged open lid of the ammo box and unzipped the plastic bag to withdraw the object stowed therein.

The light rays twinkled off a heavy gold chain which had been wrapped around the object. Why did it look so familiar, this thing which someone had surreptitiously buried here in the secrecy of the night?

The roar of the nearby rapids blended with the sudden roar of blood in Tommy Rockford's ears as he recognized the mystery object.

He was holding the handle of the ancient Aztec ceremonial dagger which contained Friar Salazar's 400-year-old parchment, the only key to the location of a vast cache of Aztec treasure.

Only last night Doc Bonilla had told them, "*the only way anybody could get this parchment would be to kill me first—*"

CHAPTER TEN

High Water Before Dawn

Tommy Rockford returned the broken Aztec dagger to its watertight plastic container and thrust it deep inside his sleeping bag. Then, carrying his pen light, he went bounding through the night to where Doc Bonilla had spread his ground tarp and bedroll, sick with dread as to what might be awaiting him there.

The tiny beam of the flashlight picked up the mummiform shape of Bonilla's sleeping bag, its rain hood concealing the archeologist's bald head and protecting his face from the stinging sand.

The form inside the bag seemed ominously still. Drawing the hood to one side, Tommy played the beam across the shiny dome of Bonilla's pate, on the plastic patch which an elastic band held in place over the empty left eyesocket even when its owner was sleeping, down to an open mouth framed by a cavalier's mustache and pointed beard, lacking its usual tidy look because Bonilla had not trimmed it since leaving Flagstaff. Doc's ordinarily ruddy flesh had the unhealthy pallor of molded putty.

His Spanish friend was dead.

That was Tommy's first thought. The right eyelid was half open, exposing the white of the eyeball which reflected the flashlight beam as dully as milk glass. Then an eerie snorting sound came from Bonilla's nostrils and Tommy was overjoyed to see the sleeping bag heave to a convulsive inhalation.

"Doc! — Doc! Wake up! It's Tomás!"

Bonilla failed to respond to K6ATX's frantic cry. The heavy snoring and gurgling chest sounds resumed, as if Bonilla were breathing under water. They told of a human being struggling for life.

Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was not needed, nor was heart massage, the basic first-aid techniques familiar to Tommy.

Gingerly, K6ATX unzipped the bag to Bonilla's waist and unbuttoned the woolen shirt he was using for sleepwear. There was no bleeding, no sign of a stab wound or bullet hole in chest or throat. There were no bruises or abrasions visible on torso or head. Tommy shook the insensible man and shouted close to his ear, but got no reaction. He knew then that his old friend EA7WK was not in a heavy sleep. He was in some sort of coma. That could mean a stroke. A massive heart attack. Maybe a narcotic of some kind...

Tommy did not have the medical expertise to cope with this emergency. He zippered the sleeping bag snugly around Bonilla, then came to his feet and slogged through the sand along the base of the cliff in the direction he knew Ellwood Sixto had his camp. He was running so hard in his panic that he stumbled headlong over Sixto's prostrate form, lying on his side in a down-filled sleeping bag fifty yards from Bonilla's.

Sixto sat bolt upright in bed with a shout that was part fear, part outrage. Tommy played the flashlight beam on his own face to identify himself as he scrambled to his feet.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Sixto, but something terrible has happened to Doc Bonilla! He seems to be comatose or something. Come over and see what you think. He might even be dying."

Sixto crawled groggily out of his sleeping bag, the cold wind seeming to snap him out of a drowsy stupor.

"Probably dead drunk. Doc was partying pretty hard." Sixto put on his thick glasses and began pulling on a pair of Adidas canvas shoes over his bare feet.

"No! He's not intoxicated! The others were consuming a lot of beer and hard liquor, but Doc confined himself to coffee. He must have drunk half a dozen cups. Whatever it is, he's in scary shape."

Sixto pulled on a warm sweatshirt and a woolen cap.

"You remember he was complaining of feeling dizzy when he left the party," Sixto said, following Tommy through the darkness toward Bonilla's camp. "Which suggests to me that he was too keyed up to sleep, so maybe he overdosed on sleeping pills."

They heard Bonilla's labored breathing even before they reached the Spaniard's camp. Sixto knelt down, felt the old man's neck for a carotid pulse, leaned closer to sniff his breath, and then looked up

at Tommy, his face pale and ominously grim.

"Tommy, I think Doc Bonilla is dying. And I don't have the foggiest notion what to do."

Then inspiration came to K6ATX.

"I have it! Remember that MD from New Orleans, the one who played the banjo? I'm going over to Georgina's camp and get him, even if I have to rouse the whole darn camp. Doctor Ken McNiece, I think they introduced him as."

Ellwood Sixto said, "Excellent idea, Tommy. Tell him to bring a stomach pump, if he brought his medical bag along, which is extremely doubtful. I believe Bonilla's had a CVA—a cardio-vascular accident—in his brain, maybe a fatal one. At least foul play doesn't seem to be indicated. Hurry. I'll stand by till you get back with the medico."

Sixto had apparently not yet noticed that the gold necklace and Aztec dagger handle were missing from Bonilla's chest.

Tommy took off at top speed. He was nearing the outskirts of the Hatcher Expedition's area when someone put the beam of an electric lantern in his face. He had been halted by one of Doc's alert sentries, Pollux.

Knowing the bodyguard spoke no English, Tommy gestured toward their own camp and said, "Señor Bonilla—*muy malo—enfermo!* Sick! I'm going to get a *medico!* Doctor, *sabe usted?* Bonilla sick!"

The rusty high school Spanish got through to Pollux, who turned off the lantern and gestured Tommy to be on his way. As K6ATX resumed his headlong dash across the Hatcher area he saw that Pollux was sprinting toward Doc Bonilla's camp.

Tommy got through the Hatcher campground without awakening any of the sleepers, most of whom were probably under the influence of alcohol. When he reached Georgina's camp he shouted, "Doctor McNiece! Help! Doctor McNiece! Emergency! Help!"

Out of the darkness came a groaning response: "I'm Doctor McNiece. What's your problem, boy?"

"It's Doc Bonilla! The one-eyed man who sang in your Deep South trio tonight. We think he's had a stroke. Or maybe he OD'd on sleeping pills or something. Please come. We think he's dying."

Five minutes later the silver haired old physician, toting a black

medical satchel Sixto had doubted he had brought along on a vacation, was kneeling alongside Doc Bonilla. The area was bathed in the white glare of a Coleman gasoline lamp that Sixto had brought up from the commissary area. Pollux had been joined by Castor, both Indians looking grim and puzzled by events they could not understand. Had they failed their duty as bodyguards?

Dr. McNiece—the retired general practitioner from Louisiana—ran the bell of his stethoscope over Bonilla's chest, thumbed back the eyelid to examine the old man's pupil reaction to light, and as Tommy had done, bent down to sniff the rich raw odor of the unconscious man's breath.

"Of course I have a stomach pump in my bag," McNiece tartly answered Sixto's question, "and we will use it right now. This man's heart and lungs sound okay. This would appear to be a reaction to an overdose of sleeping pills—seconal, phenobarbital, whatever. We'll empty his stomach and give him an intravenous injection—"

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...Doc Bonilla rallied out of it half an hour later. His speech was slurred but lucid. So far he had not noticed that the Aztec dagger with its Salazar Parchment were missing. That knowledge, Tommy was afraid, might prove too much of a shock for the old man to handle at the present time.

"His vital signs are strong," the physician reassured them. "One thing, though—your river run should be postponed a day. This man must rest at least twenty-four hours. Tell your guide that."

While Sixto and the two bodyguards were standing by listening to Dr. McNiece questioning his patient, Tommy slipped over to his own camp and retrieved the Aztec dagger handle from its hiding place. He tarried to bury the ammo box in the hole the mysterious nocturnal digger had made, smoothed off the surface, and hammered the driftwood stake back into place. The night wind had erased any footprints that the mystery digger had left, as well as Tommy's.

"One thing sure," K6ATX told himself as he headed back toward Bonilla's camp, "when daylight comes, I aim to watch and see who comes to dig under that stake, if it takes all day and tomorrow night. I'd bet my bottom dollar it'll be Duke Hollister, cruising by in the *Black Javelin* to make the pick-up. It's obvious he must have a

confederate planted on shore who knew how and where to get hold of Doc's old parchment. Somebody in Georgina's party, maybe. Or Hatcher's. Or—”

Tommy shut out of his mind the third possibility—that one of the members of their own group might be a Judas...

Doc Bonilla was deep in a natural sleep when Tommy returned, the Aztec dagger handle hidden in his windbreaker. Pollux had gone back to get some rest while Castor took the last of the night shift. Dr. McNiece and Sixto were talking in muted tones when Tommy entered the circle of lantern light.

“I will check on Dr. Bonilla's condition before our raft shoves off in the morning—which isn't too far away now,” Dr. McNiece said. “I think it wise if one of you remains here to watch over the patient for the rest of the night. When he awakens a few hours from now he may complain of nausea and a splitting headache. That should not give you any cause for concern. He's out of the woods now. At his age, though, this incident could have been fatal.”

After Dr. McNiece had returned to his own interrupted rest, a chorus of fervent thanks ringing in his ears from Sixto, and Tommy Rockford, K6ATX, said, “I can do with less sleep than you, Ellwood. You go back to your sack. I'll stay with Doc. Since we're staying over an extra day, I can sleep in tomorrow morning.”

Sixto nodded gratefully. “I appreciate that, Tommy. I am on the ragged edge of collapse myself... While you were away Dr. McNiece did what he could to analyze the contents of Doc's stomach. Lacking a laboratory test, Dr. McNiece says in his opinion our friend's condition was due to a dose of chloral hydrate—otherwise known as a Mickey Finn.”

Tommy's jaw sagged open in astonishment. “You mean—somebody put knockout drops in what Doc ate for supper?”

“How could that be? More likely it was in one of those cups of coffee Doc drank at the party.”

“That's impossible!”

“Why impossible? Anyone could have slipped some powder into Doc's cup. You know yourself, different people were manning the coffee urn during the evening. I remember seeing you bring Doc a cup of decaf, yourself, as a matter of fact.”

“Yes,” Tommy said. “Doc told me he hoped it wasn't as bitter as the last cup he drank. But who—why—”

Sixto shrugged. "Apparently you didn't notice what I did, Tommy. The Aztec dagger haft containing the Salazar Parchment—it's missing, along with the gold chain around Doc's neck. The key to who knows how many millions of dollars in gold has been stolen. We're lucky whoever it was didn't cut Doc's throat or smash his skull with a rock, instead of using an opiate. Whoever removed the relic from Doc's neck had doped him earlier in the evening to make sure of pulling it off without causing a disturbance. I know it sounds farfetched, but I would not be surprised if some ally of Duke Hollister was back of this tonight. A traitor in our midst."

Tommy Rockford, for reasons not exactly clear even to himself, decided not to mention the incredible circumstances whereby the Aztec dagger handle was in his jacket pocket at this very moment.

"I have always lived a sheltered life," Ellwood Sixto commented, as he extinguished the Coleman lamp. "Had I known all these strange happenings were going to occur, I would have declined the honor of being the State's consultant on this Mexican expedition of Bonilla's, I'm afraid."

Tommy laughed. "Head back to your sack, Ellwood. Daylight isn't far off now. I'll let you break the news to Cap'n Jolly that the expedition has to stay over a day here at Hance Rapid. After all, we aren't working against a deadline on this river run."

After Sixto had disappeared in the darkness, Tommy Rockford removed the Aztec dagger handle from his pocket and placed it inside the sleeping bag near the old man's midriff. When he awoke in a few hours, Bonilla would think the chain had slipped off his neck as he slept. There would be plenty of time for Tommy to inform him of tonight's incredible events. Later, when Doc could weather the shock.

Tommy lay down on the edge of Bonilla's ground tarpaulin and, without intending to, fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. The bright golden disk of the sun rising through a notch in the eastern rimrock awakened him. Doc Bonilla was sleeping peacefully.

Down at their own riverbank commissary, Cap'n Jolly and Whitey Rosegart were busy preparing breakfast, as yet unaware that they would be stopping over at Hance Rapid campground for another day under doctor's orders, which Dr. McNiece would deliver in person.

Getting to his feet and doing a few calisthenics to get his blood circulating again, Tommy Rockford abruptly halted his exercises when he noticed something down by the river which was different at sunrise

than it had been at sunset yesterday.

The *Titanic*, instead of its prow being drawn up on dry land, was now floating fifteen feet out in the river, bobbing and straining against the heavy ropes which anchored it to rocks on shore. Cap'n Jolly and his cook must have had to wade ashore from the *Titanic* this morning in order to get breakfast started.

The Colorado River had mysteriously risen ten feet during the night, its wavelets now lapping almost to where Rosegart had set up his cooking tables, beverage urns and dish-washing pans.

Then Tommy Rockford understood the reason. The Colorado River, since the completion of Glen Canyon Dam in 1963, no longer ran free. It was subject to daily "tides" controlled by men at the dam's enormous hydroelectric plant. Extra water was sluiced through the eight big turbines during hours of peak demand for electricity to light the streets and homes in cities of the Los Angeles Basin, to keep the neon splendor of the Las Vegas Strip a-glitter, to satisfy the insatiable thirst for power needed by the myriad factories and refineries and offices of Southern California.

A startling thought came to K6ATX. He swung around to stare down at the river where the midnight digger had buried Doc Bonilla's precious Aztec knife, leaving a stake behind to identify the precise spot for some accomplice to find later.

But Duke Hollister—assuming the Museum Bandit was the accomplice who would come to dig up the all-important key to an Aztec treasure—would never find it here on the beach at Hance Rapid! The spot where the driftwood stake had been left to identify the burial place of the ammo box was now under three feet of water.

When the river receded to its normal level later this morning, the burial spot would have been forever erased by a scouring, silt-laden back eddy of the swollen Colorado River, leaving only a smooth, unbroken terrace of wind-rippled sand.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Traitor in Our Midst?

After three mornings on the river, the members of the *Titanic* party had become accustomed to being roused by Cap'n Jolly's thunderous breakfast call of "Come an' get it!" This time, the bellowed summons was not welcomed by the seventy-odd river runners in the Georgina and Hatcher camps sharing the Hance Rapid beach, most of whom were still sleeping off last night's party.

Cap'n Jolly's usual sour morning mood did not improve when the first arrival at his chow line proved to be a stranger. He introduced himself as Kenneth McNiece, a retired physician from New Orleans who was shooting the rapids aboard Georgina Black's G-rig.

Dr. McNiece continued gravely, "Sir, it is imperative that your passenger, Mr. Bonilla, be given a full day's rest. He had a very narrow escape last night. To subject a man of his years to the periodic drenchings today's rapids hold in store could result in pneumonia. I would also suggest you consider the possibility of evacuating him by helicopter or muleback, depending upon his general condition, when you reach the Phantom Ranch heliport. The resort maintains radio communication with the South Rim."

Cap'n Jolly glared hostilely across the rim of his steaming coffee cup at his elderly visitor.

"What in blazes are you talkin' about?" the skipper demanded surly, his voice so belligerent that Dr. McNiece shrank back in alarm. "Bonilla was sound as a Coolidge dollar at supper last night. Put away seconds on our porkchops, I remember."

Ellwood Sixto moved in between them, with an apologetic aside to Dr. McNiece, "Don't mind him, sir. The Captain sleeps out on

his boat and this is the first he's heard of Dr. Bonilla's—problem."

"Will somebody clue me in on what's goin' on?" Cap'n Jolly shouted. "What problem? Did his gun go off and hit his foot?"

Dr. Sixto said patiently, "Dr. Bonilla had a severe gastric upset around midnight, sir. We had to bring Dr. McNiece over from one of the other camps to pump out his stomach. We are all deeply indebted to Dr. McNiece, who will accept no pay for his services."

"Stomach pumped? For that we have to lay over a day?"

Dr. McNiece retreated back to the friendlier ground of his own camp, leaving Ellwood Sixto to deal with the angry skipper. Sixto said quietly, "That will not inconvenience anyone, Captain. Dr. Bonilla chartered your boat on my recommendation, on an open-ended time basis. He is in full control of the itinerary. We are not a sightseeing group with only seven days in which to reach Lake Mead. Ours is a scientific expedition, arranged for by the Mexican government, in conjunction with the State of Arizona, which I represent, and the National Park Service, which has jurisdiction over all Grand Canyon river traffic. Should it be deemed necessary, Dr. Bonilla might have to stay here a week to recuperate."

Cap'n Jolly wiped his tobacco-stained mustache with the back of his hand and glowered back at Dr. Sixto. "Okay. There ain't nothing I can do about it, so we stay over. But I don't like it. I'm not used to not bein' in total charge of my own rig. If it wasn't for the five-hundred bucks a day I'm getting paid, I would chuck you all in the river and go back to Flagstaff to pick up a new charter. I've got a waiting list."

Tommy Rockford joined them at that moment, carrying his compartmented food tray, stainless steel dinner ware and cup.

"Dr. Bonilla is awake," K6ATX reported. "As Dr. McNiece predicted last night, he has a squeamish stomach and a splitting headache, but he is entirely lucid and aware of what's going on."

After a hearty breakfast, K6ATX and Dr. Sixto followed Castor and Pollux back to Dr. Bonilla's camp, to find the old man sleeping soundly. It was agreed that Tommy and Sixto would return to bed to catch up on much-needed sleep.

After a brief conference in Spanish between Dr. Sixto and the Indian bodyguards, Castor and Pollux agreed to take turns staying with Bonilla throughout the day.

The last thing Tommy saw before snuggling into his sleeping bag

was the dramatic spectacle of Georgina Black's big G-rig bouncing and plunging through the churning shoot-the-chutes of Hance Rapid, lifejacketed passengers shrieking with joy and clinging to safety bars for dear life, as was necessary when running a rapid rampaging so violently that it had been given the maximum 10 on the Grand Canyon scale.

The last person Tommy saw before the G-rig was swallowed up in a trough between waves was the banjo-playing Dr. McNiece, waving good luck to Doc Bonilla. On that pleasant note, Tommy's senses faded into sweet oblivion . . .

###

The solar-powered watch on Tommy's wrist indicated 1:15 when the overhead sun roused him, bleary-eyed but refreshed from having slumbered the entire morning away. Hunger pangs knotted his stomach, and it was with relief that he saw Whitey Rosegart down at the commissary tables, busily passing out the midday sandwiches.

The river had receded to normal levels since daybreak, exposing the ledge of sand and shingle higher up the bank where the midnight digger had buried the ammo box. The smooth wet beach bore no footprints; no one had come looking yet for the missing stick of driftwood which identified the burial site.

The two Indian bodyguards and Dr. Sixto were in Rosegart's commissary chow line picking up their cold lunch snacks. Cap'n Jolly had climbed back aboard the *Titanic*, its prow once more high and dry on the beach. He was perched on one of the food lockers with a fishing rod, angling for one of the several varieties of fish, mostly of the chub and sucker species, which were plentiful in the Colorado River this time of year, along with planted trout.

Hungry as he was, Tommy decided to delay lunch and take advantage of this rare opportunity to converse with Doc Bonilla without anyone around to eavesdrop. Back at EA7WK's camp, Tommy was pleased to find his Spanish friend sitting up in his bedroll, back braced against a pillow improvised out of his drybag. His face was a healthy pink once more, and he was sipping with obvious relish from a cup of hot tea Rosegart had brought him.

"Sixto tells me I was intentionally drugged last night," Dr. Bonilla greeted Tommy. "Which means I was incapacitated for several hours. I am fortunate the Salazar Parchment wasn't stolen during that

interval. I was certainly vulnerable to that happening."

K6ATX said, "Doc, it was stolen. For at least half an hour."

Bonilla's jaw sagged open in disbelief. "*No es posible!* The chain had come off from around my neck, *si*. But when I awakened I found the dagger safely inside my sleeping bag, the parchment intact! I devoutly thank Señor Dios that this was true. I would as soon have let the Holy Grail slip out of my possession."

K6ATX said bluntly, "Brace yourself for some more bad news, Doc. Whoever took the Aztec dagger handle while you were unconscious, put it in an ammo can and buried it down on the riverbank! I saw it happen, around midnight. I have told no one about this, not even Dr. Sixto. I thought you should know first."

Antonio Bonilla's single eye widened in utter disbelief as K6ATX went on to describe how he had dug up the ammo box, recovered the Aztec artifact, and returned it to Dr. Bonilla's sleeping bag.

He wound up by saying, "Someone who camped on this beach last night—and you know what a big crowd that gives us to choose from—put knockout drops in your coffee during the party and came here later to steal the parchment. Whoever that person was—"

"Had to be working in league with Duke Hollister..." Doc Bonilla's whisper was like a ghostly exhalation from an opened grave. "He buried it so Hollister could pick it up later. But what good would the parchment do the Museum Bandit? As highly educated as he is, I am still the only man alive who can decipher it."

"Knowing how precious that parchment is to you, with it in his possession he could blackmail you into sharing the treasure later."

"My God, I suppose that is true..."

"I do not believe that Hollister planted a confederate in either one of those other rafting groups, Doc. People have to make reservations months in advance to get space on a commercial river raft during peak season. Besides, Castor or Pollux would have intercepted any stranger crossing over into our camping area."

Bonilla fingered his beard thoughtfully. "But it would be unwise for us to assume the person was *not* from one of the other camps, Tomás. You don't know how devilishly clever Hollister is. He had plenty of time at Lee's Ferry that morning to have picked out someone to work for him, offering such a huge bribe that he couldn't fail to line up a confederate. After all, the Museum Bandit is playing for high

stakes, the highest of his career. And bribing confederates is how he has always operated.”

Tommy shook his head. “That line of reasoning doesn’t seem logical, Doc. How would Hollister have known at Lee’s Ferry that our three rafting groups would be camping together here at Hance Rapid? No. I have thought this thing out, trust me. I don’t believe any outsider could have pulled this thing off, bribe or no bribe.”

The implication behind Tommy’s words made Bonilla’s face take on a somber expression. “But if it wasn’t someone from the other camps, then that leaves us with but one alternative—”

“Right. A traitor traveling with us aboard the *Titanic*.”

Bonilla made a tragic, moaning sound deep in his throat.

“It cannot be, Tomás. I refuse to believe it. I chose our group with utmost care. I trust each and every one implicitly.”

Tommy stared off across the beach to where the members of their party, including the two bodyguards, were watching Cap’n Jolly reeling in a foot-long flannelmouth sucker, giving promise of a fresh fish dinner tonight.

“Let’s run down our roster one by one, then,” Tommy said. “My first guess would be that Cap’n Jolly is a prime suspect. No one can prove he didn’t slip away from the boat and visit your camp. He has made no secret of the fact that he dislikes working for you.”

“But El Capitan wasn’t at the beach party last night where he could have slipped the chloral hydrate into my coffee cup, Tomás.”

“True. But how well do you know the Captain? I can tell you this—he’s living under an assumed name. Could it be to hide a criminal record in his past? He pretends to be a rough, uneducated river rat—but I happen to know he was once a university professor who came to Arizona to cure himself of tuberculosis.”

Dr. Bonilla appeared stunned by this revelation. “How would you know this, Tomás? Capitan Jolly was recommended to me for this mission by my colleague Ellwood Sixto, who has known him for more than twenty years. Capitan Jolly has guided many archeological groups to the Anasazi sites in the Grand Canyon. He’s reliable.”

Remembering his promise to the truck driver, Tommy said, “I promised anonymity to the person who revealed what I know of Cap’n Jolly’s secret past, Doc. But speaking of Sixto, how can you even be sure of *his* loyalty?”

Bonilla's single eye blazed with indignation. "I have known Ellwood Sixto for over twenty years, Tomás! He has visited me in Spain, where he studied Hispanic Culture at La Universidad de Granada for two years. Your own Department of the Interior gave Sixto the highest possible character references when the State of Arizona awarded him the post of Director of the State Bureau of Antiquities. He is Arizona's leading authority on Indians of the Southwest, the author of many learned books. No indeed, *amigo*—do not even suggest that Ellwood Sixto could be working in league with a *diablo* like Duke Hollister!"

"Okay, Doc." Tommy sighed. "Well, can you imagine our cook doping your coffee? Whitey attended the party last night. Is he only pretending to be mentally retarded from old war wounds? I personally recall seeing him visit the Hatcher coffee urn to bring you a fresh cup, which I didn't think unusual at the time. I also saw you throw it into the sand. You beckoned me over to see if I could get you a cup of decaffeinated coffee, because you said the cup Whitey brought you was too strong and too bitter-tasting."

The Spaniard flashed an amused glance at Tommy Rockford.

"And may I remind you, Tomás, that after *you* had gotten them to supply you with a packet of instant Sanka, you mixed it with boiling water and brought it to me? Did you include knockout drops? You see how damaging suspicion and circumstantial evidence can be!"

Tommy's cheeks flamed crimson. "I had the opportunity, as they say in detective stories, but I don't have any *motive* to sell out to Duke Hollister, Doc."

Bonilla laughed. "Of course you don't, *hijo mio*. So consider yourself eliminated as a suspect! We are now left with Castor and Pollux. I know nothing of those *Indios*' backgrounds—both could be hardened criminals for all I know, or Indian activists intent on getting back their ancient treasure. But the Mexican government assigned them to protect my person, as you know, and I could do nothing about it. I might point out that last night, they didn't guard my body very successfully! No, Castor and Pollux must remain question marks as suspects, but doubtful ones."

Tommy speculated, "Since it appears that they do not speak English, then Hollister could not have communicated with them at Lee's Ferry. That lets our Indian friends off the hook, and we are back at square one."

Bonilla shook his head. "Not necessarily. You are forgetting that Duke Hollister is an accomplished linguist. He speaks every Continental language including Spanish, and I hear he is even fluent in such exotic tongues as Swahili and Latin and Esperanto. It is obviously farfetched, but Hollister could have bribed either of my guards. Besides, can we be *positive* Castor and Pollux do not speak fluent English? They could be feigning their ignorance of the language."

K6ATX spread his hands in a gesture of resignation.

"Which means we have weighed every member of our party and have found each one's integrity to be flawless. But we have also failed to clear any one of the six from suspicion—including me."

###

The sky over the Grand Canyon, which had been the color of Navajo turquoise ever since they left Lee's Ferry, filled with ominous-looking gray clouds by late afternoon. As Cap'n Jolly set the echos ringing with his "Come an' get it!" supper call, a big rafting party appeared up-river, approached the horrendous rapids ahead of them, and hastily pulled over to land on the grounds vacated that morning by the Hatcher Expedition. Hance Rapid was risky enough in full daylight, let alone after dusk had set in.

By day's end Dr. Bonilla was his old self again, fortified by a good appetite for lunch, his legs no longer shaky. Thunder was muttering in the distance over the mile-high North Rim and a few fat drops of rain were stippling the sand when Tommy and Dr. Sixto hurried to encase Dr. Bonilla's sleeping bag in a tube tent as protection against what might be a rainy night.

By the time Tommy had erected his own plastic tube tent between two juniper trees a few yards away from his previous night's campsite, it was sprinkling hard enough to make him pull a rubberized rain suit out of his drybag, mentally thanking Dr. Bonilla for reminding him to bring it from Santa Bonita during their initial telephone conversation.

It was pitch dark in the canyon when the rain front passed over, although occasional bolts of lightning stabbed across the sky like cracks in the shell of a black-dyed Easter egg, followed by great rolling peals of thunder, which boomed and echoed off the vertical walls of the canyon like toppling tenpins of the gods.

When the sky cleared, Tommy thought he had never seen so many

stars in his life. He watched a couple of man-made satellites glide across the strip of Milky Way visible between the canyon walls, slower than meteorites and lacking the dissolving tails of shooting stars. They reminded him of ham radio's satellites, eleven of which had been launched in recent years, two still functioning in orbit.

It was the sight of a jet liner moving in slow motion seven miles overhead that reminded Tommy that Grand Canyon rafting parties were required to maintain radio facilities capable of working a passing aircraft. He took his ammo box out from the shelter of the tube tent and removed his two-meter rig, along with the Citizen's Band transceiver the Mexican government had supplied to each of the seven members of their treasure-hunting expedition, the transmitter limited to but one crystal, Channel 14.

Out of idle curiosity to see what might be on the air, Tommy scanned both short-wave bands, expecting to hear nothing but atmospherics generated by the passing electrical storm. Was it not accepted by all radio hams that Grand Canyon QSOs were impossible?

He was surprised, then, when he heard a strong phone signal on CB Channel 7, usually set aside as a night security channel. He turned up the gain and pressed the speaker close to his ear, listening:

“...barely read you, old chap. The roar of the rapids...will move up-river where it's quieter...”

The clipped British accent of Hollister, the Museum Bandit!

The signal faded and was replaced by a stronger transmission on the same frequency, indicating a nearby location: “...don't get around the bend...line-of-sight we're okay...otherwise no...”

After five minutes of waiting for a signal, Tommy was about to scan the band in case they had QSY'd to another channel, when the second transmitter broke in on Channel 7:

“...but it was not my fault, Duke! You said bury it ten feet above the water line and mark the spot with a stake. I did. How was I to know the river would rise that far between midnight and dawn?”

A chill prickled down Tommy's spine. While the voice was not familiar, he knew it must belong to the person he had seen burying the ammo box last night, reporting to Hollister out on the river.

Duke Hollister's answering signal was down in the mud this time, but faintly readable: “...with the stake washed away, the parchment is lost...Unless Bonilla made a copy, we've blown it...Knowing him for the stubborn bloke he is, Bonilla would jolly well submit to torture

and death before leading us to that cache. What do you propose we do? Over."

Tommy Rockford's heart was pounding so loud in his ears he almost missed the next transmission: "...wait a couple of days...until we start searching for that Maltese Cross petroglyph...below Lava Rapids. Bonilla is calling the shots...here on out..."

The signal slowly faded out, but the last readable sentence was etched into Tommy's memory forever. Bonilla was calling the shots! If he called off the hunt for the Maltese Cross petroglyph, it would mean he was aborting the hunt for Ozar's gold. As long as he continued searching for the symbol Friar Salazar had carved into the cliff, the two conspirators would be monitoring the treasure hunt radios, waiting to move in at the critical moment and take over.

Hollister's voice came back with a final transmission: "That is good advice, old chap. We bide our time. Over and out."

The handie-talkie went dead except for crackling static, closing out the first Grand Canyon QSO Tommy had ever heard. He switched off the rig to conserve the batteries, his hands trembling when he put the TRC-215 back into the ammo can. No use scanning the two-meter ham band; he and Doc were the only ones with rigs tuned to work that part of the radio spectrum.

This sinister QSO confirmed his worst fears. Duke Hollister had planted a mole in Doc Bonilla's party, a spy playing a Judas role. The traitor who had stolen and buried the parchment Friar Salazar had written in 1541, and who obviously was unaware that Tommy Rockford had retrieved it before the rising wall of water released from Glen Canyon Dam had erased its burial place. That, at least, gave Doc Bonilla and K6ATX a slight advantage over the unknown enemy lurking in their midst.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Death Lurks at Havasu

Within five minutes after the mystery QSO ended, Tommy Rockford was reporting his shocking discovery to Doc Bonilla. Both agreed it was useless to attempt to check on the other five members of their party to see if they were awake and using their CB radios. The guilty operator had had plenty of time to put away his rig and be feigning sleep.

"At least we know Hollister has a confederate among us," K6ATX said. "We don't have to wonder any more. Under the circumstances, I wouldn't blame you for calling our treasure hunt off, Doc, much as I know what it means to you. The suspense must be unbearable, waiting for an assassin to strike."

"This is hard to explain, Tomás," Doc Bonilla's whisper came softly from the darkness, "but instead of being demoralized, I feel exhilarated at getting the truth out into the open. Now that we've come this far, I intend to carry on as planned."

Tommy reached out a hand to grip the old Spaniard's shoulder. The affection between them, developed over the past five years through many a DX contact on the ham bands, had forged a bond as close as father and son—especially in times of crisis such as they had shared last year on San Miguel Island, and tonight in the black depths of the Grand Canyon.

"That's settled, then," K6ATX yawned. "I'm glad. But it's time we hit the sack. Tomorrow will be a long and rough and very wet day, Cap'n Jolly tells us, but at least we don't have to worry about Hollister taking a pot shot at you for the next two or three days. He distinctly said over the air that they'd wait to see whether we located that Maltese

Cross carved into a cliff below Lava Rapid before they made their next move.”

Bonilla reached up to squeeze Tommy’s hand. “Cap’n Jolly seems positive there is no Maltese Cross petroglyph anywhere along the Grand Canyon. But if he is Hollister’s spy, as you seem to think he might be, he would deny the existence of the key clue to our whole expedition, hoping to help Hollister find it first.”

“Or, if Cap’n Jolly knows where the Maltese Cross is, he would want to keep that information to himself and put Hollister and us off the scent. But Doc—what if he’s right? What if the petroglyph has weathered away after four centuries of exposure to the elements—where does that leave us, Doc?”

His old friend exhaled a heavy sigh in the darkness.

“Without the Maltese Cross, all is *finito*, Tomás. The greatest archeological event of the century would go up in smoke. I cannot bring myself to think about that alternative. Sometimes I can almost feel Friar Salazar’s ghost at my side, guiding me. I’m talking like Duke Hollister, conversing with ghosts, am I not? With which superstitious statement I will now say *buenos noches*, Tomás.”

K6ATX got stiffly to his feet. “Before I go, partner, I want you to sleep on this question: Is Ozar’s gold worth the suicidal risk you are running against Duke Hollister? We can always abort the expedition and hike out of the Canyon when we reach Phantom Ranch tomorrow. Whatever you decide, I’m with you to the last mile.”

“I know that, Tomás. *Vaya con Dios*—go with God.”

###

The following day was the first of July and their fifth on the river. It proved to be a strenuous day, living up to Cap’n Jolly’s warning that they faced a cold and wet experience, even with the heat of summer turning the Grand Canyon into a blast furnace. The day’s run included some of the Canyon’s major rapids—Horn Creek, Hermit, Boucher, and the famous rock-studded plunge at Crystal Creek, which had given Tommy nightmares as a kid. This time, somehow, it didn’t seem quite as horrendous.

Between Lee’s Ferry and Lake Mead the Colorado River drops a total of 1,886 feet in elevation via stair-step terraces formed by more than 170 rapids. Some of the roughest rapids lie between Hance, marking their departure at Mile 77, elevation 2,550 feet, and a minor

riffle at Mile 116, elevation 2,200 feet, near which Cap'n Jolly picked a beach for their fourth overnight.

In Tommy's view, the treasure-hunting expedition reached its point of no return when they came in sight of the Kaibab footbridge ten miles down the river, a span which linked the Phantom Ranch tourist resort river in Bright Angel Canyon with Grand Canyon Village and El Tovar Hotel up on the South Rim.

Beyond that point, river runners were committed to continue on two-hundred miles to the major take-out points at Pierce Ferry or Temple Bar on the shores of Lake Mead, usually five days by boat.

"Last chance to chicken out," Cap'n Jolly needled them as they passed the fleet of rafts and dories which clotted the beach on the north side of the river. "You can hike up to civilization if you got the stamina to climb seven miles o' switchbacks. Or nine miles by Bright Angel Trail. Or of course you can shell out a bundle for a chopper to lift you out. What'll it be?"

Again, it seemed to Tommy, Cap'n Jolly was doing everything he could to persuade Doc Bonilla to give up his expedition.

Ellwood Sixto said, "You don't have to walk out. You can rent mules at Phantom Ranch to take you up to both rims of the Canyon."

Cap'n Jolly snorted. "And wind up with such sore bottoms you'll eat off the mantle for a month? Rather than put my tailbone to that torture I'd crawl out, pushing a peanut with my nose."

Tommy Rockford gave vent to a loud "Amen!" He had made that muleback ride ten years ago, as a kid exploring the Canyon with his Dad. He had taken a solemn oath never to subject his buns to that slow, liver-wrenching punishment again.

What he remembered most vividly was what his father had said when they finally reached the South Rim. He had pointed back down to where the Colorado River shone like a glittering copper wire along the bottom of the twisting abyss and said, "Son, if you ever have trouble conceiving just how big this Canyon really is, think of it this way: If Niagara Falls were down there, big and spectacular though they are, you could barely find them with your naked eye!"

As they floated under the last span across the Grand Canyon—the new Silver Bridge near Mile 88—Cap'n Jolly fixed his eye on Doc Bonilla and said, "All ashore that's goin' ashore. This bologna boat can't buck the current to get back if you change your mind. Next exit by road, Diamond Crick at Mile 226."

All eyes were on Doc Bonilla, whose word would determine whether the expedition would continue or be terminated here. The old Spaniard pointed his arm dramatically downstream and cried with all the fervor of a true *conquistador*, "Vamanos full speed ahead, Capitan! I did not come all the way from Espana to abandon ship!"

Cap'n Jolly's shrug, Tommy thought, expressed the skipper's mingled disappointment and frustration.

###

Doc Bonilla's obvious sense of urgency to reach Lava Rapid as soon as possible and begin their search for Friar Salazar's Maltese Cross petroglyph seemed to transmit itself to the other river runners on the *Titanic* the following day.

Breaking their camp at Mile 118 within an hour of sunrise, they passed up landmarks where other expeditions tied up their boats so the tourists could take exploratory hikes up side canyons. Thus they missed the maidenhair fern gardens at Elves Chasm in Royal Arch Creek, the numerous spectacular side canyons of the Middle Granite Gorge, and the chance for a refreshing shower bath under beautiful Deer Creek Falls at Mile 136.

Foregoing the usual lunch break on shore in favor of logging an extra hour of cruising, Whitey Rosegart opened one of his ice boxes and passed out cold red apples and cans of salted peanuts for a mid-morning snack, then served sandwiches, raw vegetables, and beverages from the drag-bag at high noon.

The day's run produced a number of roller-coaster rapids to remember—Spectre, Bedrock, Deubendorff, Tapeats, Upset, plus a host of lesser cascades bearing mile-number names on the map.

Then, at three o'clock, they tied up at a break in the Muav Limestone cliffs, which mark one of the Colorado River's major natural attractions for sightseers—Havasu Creek Canyon. Ellwood Sixto believed that this was where friendly Anasazis had led Padre Salazar out of the Grand Canyon four-hundred years ago, on his way back to Mexico and martyrdom. Two other rafts had tied up there ahead of them, the passengers off sightseeing.

"I got to tinker with the outboard motor," Cap'n Jolly explained the unscheduled stop, "plus patchin' up some leaky compartments in our pontoons before we find ourselves starting to sink—and any durned fool knows a boat named the *Titanic* can't sink! So I figgered

as long as we got to pull in for a pit stop it might as well be at a beauty spot. Half a mile up the crick is a perty waterfall an' some of the best natural swimmin' holes you'll find in Arizona. The trail is narrow an' on the risky side, but I recommend you all make the hike."

Again Tommy got the impression that Cap'n Jolly was trying to manipulate their actions. Or was he getting paranoid?

The excuses began coming in. Ellwood Sixto, admitting that the heat was getting to him—although he stubbornly refused to take off his long-sleeved shirt as protection against cancer-causing sun rays—said that he had hiked up Havasu Canyon many times before, and would take a rain check this time, thanks just the same.

Doc Bonilla, still a bit shaky from his bad experience at Hance Rapids campground, declined to make the hike for reasons of health and age, which meant that Castor and Pollux would also remain behind. Whitey Rosegart, who had sprained an ankle slightly scrambling over some rocks yesterday while carrying their portable sanitary facility ashore, explained that he, also, had made the Havasu Creek hike several times and would beg off exerting himself.

"Which leaves me," Tommy Rockford said. "I'd like to see those travertine swimming pools. Dad and I missed 'em, our first trip down the river. How much time can you give me, skipper?"

Cap'n Jolly, busy getting out his tool kit to make repairs on the motor, shrugged his shoulders. "An hour should give you time to make it up there, have yourself a swim, and get back before we hit the river again." He saw Tommy holding his plastic water bottle up to the light to check the contents. "You better fill up from the water jug here on the boat, Tommy. Havasu Creek sparkles like blue crystal and looks like it would quench the thirst of the gods. And it can. But it's my bounden duty to remind all dudes that about ten miles up that creek is the Injun village of Supai, the only one along the Grand Canyon. The tribe uses the creek for bathin', garbage disposal, laundry, an' toilet. 'Nough said."

Tommy turned to Doc Bonilla. "Suppose we test our two-meter rigs?" he whispered. "Fire up your hearing aid about thirty minutes from now. I'll give you a shout and see if I can bounce a signal down the canyon, like the Signal Corpsmen used to do in Korea."

Bonilla nodded. "Roger Wilco, Tomás. Enjoy yourself."

Jumping off the boat to the slickrock ledge above the river, Tommy climbed up to the twisting narrow trail leading into the

limestone throat of Havasu Creek Canyon. To counter the punishing heat which radiated off the rock walls on either side of the creek, he had stripped to his bathing trunks and Dodger cap, a towel draped over his shoulders. He had clipped his filled water bottle to his belt, counterbalancing it on the other hip with the leather case containing his two-meter ICOM transceiver. Tommy's folks had long since schooled him that whenever one hiked alone along a strange trail, it was always good policy to carry a radio.

Havasu Creek is depicted in tourist postcards as being blue in color. It actually is. This is because Havasu Creek is rich in calcium, which reflects blue light, as well as giving the tumbling stream the sparkling bubbly brilliance of champagne.

A short distance up-canyon from the river the trail lifted to a ledge a hundred feet above the creek, which narrowed and finally forced Tommy back down again to the stream bed. As he forded through the cold knee-deep water he met a happy group of river runners returning to the rafts he had seen tied up on the river.

"You've got a treat in store for you, brother!" sang out a sun-burned college-age girl wearing a lemon-yellow bikini and a flop-brimmed sun hat. "Warmish, but cool, if you know what I mean."

The trail ended at a low cliff blocking the canyon, over which the creek plunged in a foaming white torrent. The calcium precipitate from the sparkling waterfall had built a series of semi-circular travertine dams below the falls, each of which enclosed a perfect swimming hole. He was alone except for one skinny-dipper frolicking under the falls.

This was the first time since leaving the motel at Flagstaff that K6ATX had had a really good bath, since the silt-laden water of the Colorado left a scummy film on the skin. He removed his Dodger cap, Nike shoes, water bottle and leather-cased radio and laid them aside, then took the plunge. The water, seven or eight feet deep, was invigorating, yet warm compared to the numbing cold of the Colorado River.

Tommy was splashing like a dolphin at play and generally relaxing in the calcium-charged waters when he heard the other swimmer calling above the roar of the falls. A black-haired, deeply tanned man of thirty-odd, the muscles of his naked body gleaming like a bronze statue's. White teeth flashing, he shouted a friendly greeting: "Ever seen a harder place to leave, buddy?"

Tommy shouted back, "I could take a whole month of this!"

After an interval of unalloyed sport, Tommy consulted his waterproof watch. His allotted time was up; he would have to be getting back to the *Titanic*. As he scrambled out onto the nearest travertine dike he noticed that the other swimmer had followed suit, splashing his way over to where he had piled his clothing.

Tommy combed the water out of his thick blond hair with spread fingers. Toweling was not necessary; the stored-up heat of the long summer day reflected back to air-dry his body in minutes, and dried his swim trunks almost as rapidly.

K6ATX snapped the water bottle back onto his belt and took his two-meter ICOM-2AT out of its case, switched it on and put a call on the air to Doc Bonilla as they had arranged: "EA7WK, this is K6ATX testing. How copy down there, Doc?"

The other swimmer paused in toweling himself as he heard Doc Bonilla's resonant baritone voice returning: "K6ATX, EA7WK here. *Poco bueno*, considering your QTH, Tomas. How receive?"

"A dB over nine, maybe. Too bad you couldn't have enjoyed the cool bathtubs up here, Doc! Tell Cap'n Jolly I'm starting back now and won't keep the boat waiting. K6ATX clear."

As Tommy was putting the ICOM back into its case he became aware that the other swimmer had donned a pair of faded jeans and had moved over to regard the rig with obvious curiosity. He asked, "Excuse my nosiness, pal, but is that a CB or a ham outfit?"

"Two-meter ham. I was just testing with a buddy down at the river, curious to see how VHF got out under these conditions. The Park Service claims short-wave radio only works ground-to-air in the Grand Canyon, but they're wrong. At least for short-range work."

The man said wistfully, "I've wanted to be a ham operator ever since I was a kid. Tell me, why do you call yourselves 'hams'?"

K6ATX grinned. He always enjoyed recruiting strangers to the wonderful world of Amateur Radio. He could tell by the shine in this man's eyes that another candidate for hamming was on the hook.

"Why don't you ask me an easy one? I don't think anybody really knows where the term 'ham' for an amateur operator comes from. Some say it's Cockney dialect for a radio 'hamateur'."

"How far can you talk on this outfit? Is it expensive?"

"This particular rig retails for around two-hundred bucks. As for range, you won't believe this, but I've sat beside my pool at home

in California and used this little handful of integrated circuitry to yak with a ham in Scotland, and another in India, and any number of times to China and Japan, and even ships at sea. In fact, once I worked London while driving along an LA Freeway!"

The stranger stared incredulously at the little transceiver in Tommy's hand and waggled his head in mingled amazement and envy.

"You did that with that dinky little set? Are you serious?"

"We-ell," Tommy confessed, "I didn't make the QSOs on *two meters* exactly. You see, I hooked up with a repeater that had the capability of receiving my two-meter FM signal and transmitting it on *ten* meters. It's called working cross-band DX. Makes the whole world your oyster."

The man walked back to his pile of clothes and pulled on a Venetian gondolier's blue-and-white striped T-shirt, tugged on a pair of cowboy boots, then a New York Yankees baseball cap. Tommy Rockford was about to make a facetious remark about being an LA Dodgers fan—and therefore an automatic Yankee-hater—when he saw the man pick up a shiny metal object which had been concealed under the baseball cap. It was a 9-mm Baretta semi-automatic pistol.

Turning to face him, the man casually lifted the black bore of the gun so that it was aimed point-blank at Tommy's midriff.

"I hate to do this to you, kid," he apologized, "because I like you. And it would have been fun if you could have helped steer me into ham radio. But the reason I was waiting for you here at the waterfall is because I have orders to pick you up for questioning, you might say. Your name is Tommy, I believe. Mine is—"

In a blinding flash of recognition, K6ATX interrupted, "I *thought* you looked familiar! I saw you at Lee's Ferry the other morning. You're Tony Slade. Duke Hollister's pilot."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Black Javelin Massacre

Tommy Slade gestured with his gun barrel toward the trail twisting off to the river half a mile below.

"We aren't returning the same way you came up," he said. "There's a fork that leads to the right, over the rimrock and down to a break in the cliffs where we've hidden the *Black Javelin*. We'll be taking that fork. If we meet any river runners this side of the fork, don't even say 'hi!' Just remember that under my towel is this sixteen-shot equalizer pointing straight at you."

Tommy started down the travertine slope toward the head of the trail, Slade following with his towel concealing the automatic.

"How'd you happen to be waiting for me here?" K6ATX asked. "You and Hollister had no way of knowing the *Titanic* would even be stopping at Havasu Creek. Or did your buddy Cap'n Jolly tip you off by radio? Even if he did, how would you know I would be taking a solo hike up here? And why take me prisoner? I'm nobody."

Ignoring Tommy's questions, Slade said, "Keep walking. The fork is coming up... As to why I was up here ahead of you—I was up on the rim keeping tabs on river traffic, especially the *Titanic*. When Rogers' River Rats pulled in I saw you take off up the canyon alone. The Duke wants to see you, Tommy. It was no big deal, my taking a shortcut along the rimrock and getting in a ten-minute dip before you came limping up, sweating like a hog."

They encountered no other tourists on the way down the canyon to where Tommy had forded the stream. Here a barely visible fork led off to a brush-mottled talus slope dotted with barrel cacti. Probably an ancient Indian trail, with no signs of recent use. A stiff, short climb

took them to the caprock of the east cliff.

"Over this little mesa and bear left into the ravine which leads down to the river," Slade said, keeping close behind him.

K6ATX followed orders. The trail threaded around numerous potholes which still held rainwater from the recent storm, past spiky thickets of banana-leaf yucca and ocotillo, reminding them that an arid desert extended deep into the multi-colored canyon.

Tommy retreated into his own thoughts. He wrapped his towel around the radio unit to make it less conspicuous. As long as he had the HT rig, somehow, he felt he had a link with the outside.

He knew they were heading for the *Black Javelin*, concealed from the curious view of passing river runners or the surveillance of Park Service aircraft who patrolled the gorge several times a day. Duke Hollister had no way of knowing whether his black speedboat was the subject of an all-points bulletin out of Park headquarters up at the Village. Tommy theorized that Hollister probably traveled only by night, maintaining contact with Cap'n Jolly by radio, mooring out of sight daytimes. He didn't envy Slade shooting the rapids in a relatively small launch, and after dark to boot.

Fifteen minutes after leaving the swimming pools, Rockford and his captor rounded a square turn in the narrow defile they were following and saw the glint of slack water below. The Colorado thrust its fingers into every break in the riverbanks. This one was hidden from the mainstream by tamarisks and junipers rooted to sand which had sluiced down from the ravine by flash flooding.

They had almost reached the water level before Rockford caught sight of the sleek-hulled *Black Javelin*, concealed from anyone passing on the river by the dense hedge of riparian growth. The stern of the launch was visible to the two men sliding their way down the last stretch of gritty trail. Laid back in a lounging chair in the fore part of the cockpit was the lean figure of Duke Hollister, sipping at a highball glass, fingering a Havana cigar. He was clad in the same Hawaiian shirt and plaid boxer shorts he had worn at Lee's Ferry, but the stock of a Colt .45 automatic now protruded from his hip in lieu of the shoulder-holstered Luger.

"Well, we meet again, young fellow!" the internationally known museum bandit greeted the heat-flushed youth. "In my haste to depart Lee's Ferry the other day, I left a fine pair of pre-war German binoculars behind me. I am disappointed to see that you are not

returning them. You also have a Luger pistol of mine, eh?"

Tommy's lips curled disdainfully as he retorted, "Your buddy Jolly Rogers is keeping your stuff safe for you on the *Titanic*, I'm sure. Ah, you're surprised I know about you and the Cap'n? That's a big advantage of CB radio. I was reading the mail when you had your little Channel 7 ragchew with him at our Hance Rapid camp."

Hollister drained the rest of his cooling drink with a backward toss of his head and set the glass aside.

"Whatever are you talking about, son?" he asked in feigned puzzlement. "We will be checking to see if Captain Jolly has my property in safe keeping shortly." He turned to Slade, who still held his Baretta poised for action as he and Tommy stood on the sandy bank alongside the launch.

"There are no other boats moored at the mouth of Havasu Creek," Hollister said. "The Park Service patrol plane passed five minutes ago on its home flight, so I think we can jolly well make our play immediately and in broad daylight. This black launch is too conspicuous for us to continue to use, what with hiding places getting increasingly scarce here in the Inner Gorge."

Tommy felt Slade nudge him between the shoulder blades with the muzzle of his automatic.

"Hop aboard, pal. Chief, have the cuffs ready."

K6ATX reached for Hollister's extended hand, placed his left foot on the gunwale of the launch, and jumped aboard. Before he could recover his balance, Hollister had produced a pair of chrome-plated manacles, which he snapped around Tommy's wrists.

"Having engaged in fisticuffs with you at Lee's Ferry, I have no desire to test your athletic prowess again," Hollister laughed, reaching out to give his pilot a hand as Slade came aboard. "Sit down on the stern bench there, please. Be a good little boy, Tommy, and no harm will come to you."

"But why are you kidnapping me?" Tommy demanded indignantly, tucking his rolled-up towel with the two-meter rig inside between his back and the gunwale.

"Isn't that obvious, dear boy? You're my assurance that Doctor Bonilla will not resist my proposal to put a couple of extra passengers aboard his rented *Titanic*. Ruddy macabre name Captain Jolly chose for his shabby raft, by the way. Downright unlucky. We British are

a maritime people and prefer not to mention that particular vessel out of our glorious past."

Seating himself at the stern, Tommy watched Slade crawl over the foredeck under the screening tamarisks and pull in the light anchor from the sandy bank. The launch bobbed and rocked as the pilot scrambled back to take his position at the helm.

"Interesting botanical specimen, the tamarisk," Hollister went on irrelevantly. "Each tree requires 300 gallons of water daily to sustain itself. I understand your bloody Park Service is having to remove tamarisk growth from water holes in Death Valley to keep them from drying up. And to think tamarisks aren't even indigenous to your Grand Canyon, or even the United States! I believe they were imported from the Middle East. End of botany lesson. Getting back to your question, Tommy—I need you for leverage when I negotiate with Doctor Bonilla."

"Don't be too rough on Doc," Tommy pleaded. "He's just an old man trying to locate some Anasazi relics before souvenir hunters find 'em and vandalize 'em. The artifacts wouldn't have any value to a world-class museum robber like yourself."

Hollister's ice-blue eyes glittered with sarcastic amusement as he resumed his cockpit chair and paused to fire up his cigar, using a diamond-encrusted gold lighter bearing his family crest.

"Tut-tut, my boy! Are you so naive you actually think Bonilla is hunting Indian souvenirs, Tommy? Or didn't he take you into his confidence about the true object of his Grand Canyon expedition?"

The two locked stares. Was Hollister fishing for information? Tommy determined not to make a slip of the tongue which might impart any confidential intelligence. "I don't know what you mean. All I know is what Bonilla wrote me in that letter you tried to intercept last week in Santa Bonita."

"Maybe he *doesn't* know, Duke," Slade suggested.

"Okay, so allow me to brief you," Hollister said. "According to my reliable sources in Mexico City—I have connections with every major museum in the world, I assure you—our friend Doctor Bonilla has in his possession a certain ancient Spanish parchment of great value. It has instructions on where some of Coronado's explorers cached a vast amount of Aztec gold and silver, somewhere here in the Grand Canyon, back in the mid-Sixteenth Century. I intend to

make the Mexicans pay a fat ransom to get their cultural treasures back. If they balk, I'll threaten to melt down the gold objects."

"None of that information was in the letter you broke into my house to read, you remember."

Hollister and Slade exchanged glances. "You are always talking in riddles, Tommy. I understand you are studying to be an astronaut at Cal Tech? I am sure that no Cal Tech student would be so ingenuous as to think that I, Duke Hollister, prince of plunderers, who once had the *Mona Lisa* in my possession, would be trailing Dr. Bonilla through these horrendous rapids of the Colorado River, if I didn't know there was a pot of gold at the end of his elusive rainbow!... Okay, Slade my good man, let's move. I imagine Jolly is getting restless for Tommy's return from his hike about now."

Slade switched on the ignition. The *Black Javelin*'s finely tuned inboard motor responded with a deep-throated purr. Shifting the propellor into gear, Slade sent the speedboat gliding forward, its shiny black hull thrusting the low-hanging tamarisk foliage aside and gliding out into the sluggish edge of the river.

Fifty yards downstream, Tommy caught sight of the *Titanic*. All passengers were aboard, obviously awaiting his overdue return.

With the sleek grace of its namesake, the *Black Javelin* slipped out into the current, swung its prow ninety degrees to port, and came abreast of Cap'n Jolly's pontooned raft, but remained some fifty feet out into the river.

While Slade was maneuvering the *Black Javelin* into position, Hollister had obtained an Israeli-built Uzi machine gun from a locker under the instrument panel of the launch and had taken a position alongside the port gunwale, sun rays flashing on the weapon's blue-black metal as he aimed the weapon at Tommy.

Aboard the *Titanic*, Tommy's erstwhile companions sat or stood in frozen tableau, being close enough to read the name on the bow of Hollister's launch, and absorbing the full meaning of the Uzi which held Tommy Rockford as its target.

"Tommy," Hollister said in an undertone from the corner of his mouth, "Stand up and inform your friends to cooperate fully, or the river is going to run a lot redder than it does now. They will not sacrifice you, depend on it."

K6ATX came to his feet, knowing that Hollister was not bluffing about bloodshed resulting from any attempt at resistance.

"Doc! Cap'n Jolly! You're being hijacked!" Tommy shouted, lifting his hands so that all persons concerned could see that his wrists were shackled, that he was Hollister's captive. "Don't try to resist or we'll have a slaughter here. Starting with me."

What followed was almost too fast for Tommy's eyes to absorb.

At the prow of the *Titanic*, bracketing Doc Bonilla's either elbow, Castor and Pollux whipped their Uzis out from under their ponchos as one.

The Baretta in Tony Slade's grasp spat flame and bucked back against the crotch of his thumb, the slug tearing a chunk from Castor's skull and dropping him at the same instant that he triggered his Uzi harmlessly into the river.

Pollux, standing behind Doc Bonilla, with one mighty sweep of his left arm drove the Spaniard to his knees and out of the line of fire, at the same time triggering a shot at Hollister in the black launch, ready to sacrifice his own life to protect the man he had been hired to accompany out of Mexico.

Hollister swung his Uzi around and fired a short burst, the chattering roar blending with the crackle of Pollux's weapon. His chest crisscrossed with a string of bullet holes, Pollux's knees buckled. He went down in section, like a folding ruler, spilling his lifeblood as he slumped out of sight on the deck of the *Titanic* to sprawl crosswise over the corpse of his partner.

Too shocked to move, Tommy stared across the narrowing gap of water separating the launch from the river raft, staring through the gunsmoke at the massacre scene aboard the *Titanic* as if it were a color photograph arrested forever in a hundredth of a second.

Crouched in the stern well was Cap'n Jolly, hands gripping the rubber handle of his motor tiller. Ellwood Sixto was seated on a food locker, sweating inside his long-sleeve shirt, frozen in paralysis following the brief crackle of gunfire. Whitey Rosegart was stooped in the act of drawing a net-meshed dragbag out of the water to get at their beer supply. In the prow, Doc Bonilla had risen to his feet, his right hand gripping the butt of his .357 Magnum, only half-drawn from its holster. The Spaniard was staring transfixed at the two dead men at his feet, unable to comprehend the violent events of the last five clock-ticks of time.

The first voice to break the shocked silence as the echoes of gunshots retreated in the distance was that of Cap'n Jolly.

"Doc, might be best if you took that gun of yours between thumb an' forefinger and lifted it real easy-like out of the holster and gave it the deep six. Them *hombres* in the black boat mean business. I got a hunch their business concerns your business, more'n it does any of the rest of us."

Tommy was aware that Slade had put the *Black Javelin* into reverse at low throttle, counteracting the tug of the river while the current caused the launch to drift closer to the *Titanic*.

Bonilla's single eye blazed with fury as he shifted his glance from the black launch to Cap'n Jolly. To the latter the Spaniard lashed out, "In World War Two when we were fighting the Nazis, you would have been called a *collaborateur*, Capitan! A form of life ten grades lower than a sewer rat! How was I to know when I hired you for this expedition that you were working for another rat?"

Cap'n Jolly looked over at Duke Hollister, who was holding his smoking Uzi lined squarely on Doc Bonilla. Whatever Jolly was about to say was interrupted by Tommy Rockford, who had kept his eye on Doc Bonilla's gun hand, knowing that any second now the Spaniard might attempt to use the .357 Magnum, also knowing the old man would fall in a burst of steel slugs before he could bring his handgun up for a shot.

"Doc, don't commit suicide!" K6ATX yelled to his friend. "Do what Cap'n Jolly told you and throw your gun in the river. What he said is true—Hollister wants to negotiate with you. He knows all about Ozar's gold cache—he told me so! So don't be foolish, Doc."

Bonilla swiveled his head around to stare accusitively at his young radio ham friend, as if momentarily wondering if K6ATX had sold out to the criminal who had sworn to assassinate him.

Then all the defiance seemed to drain out of Doc Bonilla. Using his thumb and forefinger as Cap'n Jolly had instructed, the old man lifted the Magnum from its leather case and with a groan of anguish, tossed it overboard, just as the chromium-cleated gunwale of Hollister's sleek speedboat drifted parallel to the inflated neoprene outrider pontoon of Cap'n Jolly's *Titanic*.

"That's the only gun left on board besides the .30-30 Winchester I carry in the big locker," Cap'n Jolly announced. "As skipper of this tub, what are you fixin' to do? Kidnap Bonilla?"

Hollister, his Uzi at the ready, leaped from launch to raft, sizing up the situation he found there with a cool raking glance.

"Slade and I are piping ourselves aboard—for the duration of your treasure hunt," Hollister said grimly. "It's getting too bloody hazardous, hiding our bleeping launch by day and running those infernal rapids by night, even if that's Slade's specialty. So—Admiral Jolly, stand by to catch a line and make it fast someplace astern. You are going to give us a tow. A short tow. The *Black Javelin* has served its purpose."

Cap'n Jolly caught the nylon rope Duke Hollister's pilot tossed him and secured it to one of the iron brackets which supported the outboard motor. This caused the launch to swing around until its starboard gunwale was rubbing *Titanic*'s starboard pontoon.

"Good show!" exclaimed Hollister, relighting his cigar with the same airy gesture he would have shown in a drawing room. "Slade, I want you to transfer these two bodyguards of Bonilla's onto the launch. Make sure they're secured to something solid."

Slade jumped to obey. As Tommy and the others looked on in shocked revulsion, they saw the burly pilot seize Pollux's limp corpse by wrist and ankle and, oblivious to the bodyguard's hundred and ninety pounds of dead weight, heave it like a sack of oats onto the floorboards of the *Black Javelin*. Moments later the other dead man had been tumbled into the launch like a floppy rag doll, to land on top of Pollux.

Aboard the launch, Slade tied the necks of the two Indians together with a scrap of cordage and lashed them to the brass helm. That grisly chore accomplished, Slade turned to K6ATX and said "Back aboard your own boat, sonny. We're about to resume our historic voyage into the unknown."

Tommy Rockford, clutching his towel-wrapped radio between manacled hands, leaped aboard the *Titanic*.

Slade tarried aboard the launch belonging to the boat concessionaire at Wahweap Marina, long enough to toss his and Hollister's sleeping bags, drybags and two ammo boxes onto the *Titanic*. At the same time, obeying terse orders from the Museum Bandit, Cap'n Jolly yanked on the starting cord of his outboard motor until it roared into life.

Tommy Rockford joined Ellwood Sixto on the food locker as Hollister moved back alongside Cap'n Jolly, where he could keep everyone in view. He asked, "Got any suggestions about a camp down the river where we could be private, Admiral?"

"I know of a small-to-middlin'-sized beach at Mile 158."

"Put in there for tonight's camp. How deep is the river here?"

"This time of day, low water, a good seventy-five feet."

"Excellent!" Hollister grunted. "Let's get under way, wot?"

Cap'n Jolly gunned his throttle to send his clumsy-looking rig quartering out into the muddy river, the *Black Javelin* bucking and yawing at the end of its short tow-line.

Out in mid-river, Slade caught a signal from his boss and made his way to the stern, pulling in the tow line and timing his jump just right to land on the foredeck of the speedboat. Crawling back to the cockpit, where the two dead men lay roped together, Slade rummaged in a tool box and brought out a hand ax. As the others looked on apprehensively, Slade began chopping a hole in the bottom of the hull. When the river water was gushing in so fast he could no longer swing the ax, Slade tossed the tool overboard and scrambled back aboard the *Titanic*, with Cap'n Jolly lending him a hand. The tow line was then untied to set the black launch adrift.

The crippled *Black Javelin* was listing by the stern. The last rays of the setting sun flashed off its varnished hull as the chromium-clad prow pointed straight up at the sky like the tip of a spear, shuddered, and vanished forever in a roil of bubbles.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

K6ATX's Suicidal Choice

The one-mile run from Havasu Creek to Cap'n Jolly's campsite along the north bank at Mile 158 held an eerie, macabre quality for Tommy Rockford. He heard Cap'n Jolly assure Hollister that the tiny sandbar would meet his specifications for tonight's camp—barely large enough to accommodate their single raft and party of seven, thereby making certain that no other group would attempt to join them for an overnight stop.

River runners on the boats which passed them saw no visible sign that a hijacking had just taken place in broad daylight, nor did the sightseers aboard two low-flying chartered aircraft. They roared through the Canyon to again shatter the primal peace and quiet, bringing another profane tirade from Cap'n Jolly—with which Tommy concurred. The *Titanic* still carried seven persons, the same number that had been seen leaving Lee's Ferry, with Hollister and Slade replacing the slain bodyguards who now rested forever on the river's floor. Lost without trace, their corpses anchored to the hull of the sunken *Black Javelin*.

Cap'n Jolly stayed at his customary station in the stern well of the *Titanic* to steer the outboard motor, squinting into the red eye of the westering sun, jaws masticating his tobacco with the placid, monotonous rhythm of a cow chewing her cud. Slade stood at his side, gun holstered but ready for anything. It was impossible for K6ATX to confirm his suspicion that both river pilots had worked together in the past and were now Hollister's confederates.

The gangland-style murders of Castor and Pollux seemed to have affected Whitey Rosegar most of all, perhaps rekindling Vietnam

nightmares. Ever since the stuttering echoes of gunfire had faded away, the *Titanic*'s cook seemed frozen in a cataleptic trance, seated on one of the food lockers amidships, chin resting on knees, arms hugging his shins, eyes staring unseeingly at the blood-stained deck.

Ellwood Sixto sat on the wooden locker opposite Rosegart. His taut mouth betrayed inner tension, but his full attention was apparently focused on the multi-colored ramparts of layered stone which terraced upwards to meet isolated buttes and spindles and pedestals towering higher than the South Rim. Three thousand feet of color, layer on layer of tobacco brown, coral pink, rust red, black and ivory and dirty yellow, a billion years of geology exposed to man's view as nowhere else on the face of the earth.

Doc Bonilla remained slumped in his nest of drybags and spare life jackets near the prow, with Tommy Rockford hunkered at his side, wrists still manacled with the hijacker's steel bracelets.

Hollister, every inch the picture of a suave English nobleman, sat forward, straddling the starboard pontoon, his back to the river so that he was able to keep everyone in full view. The Uzi was concealed between his thighs, ready for instant use if he caught any of his prisoners making a covert move.

Approaching the brush-choked sandbar at Mile 158, Cap'n Jolly idled his motor and swung his rubber-sausage craft toward shore. The *Titanic* rubbed its neoprene keel onto a shelf of sand and pebbles, causing the passengers to lurch as it ground to a stop.

Hollister's stub of cigar sizzled into the river as he jumped off with the mooring line. With "the Admiral" barking out instructions, the Museum Bandit tied it around a fang of rock well above high-water mark, securing the raft for the night.

"All right, gentlemen," Hollister called out, "you will go about your normal debarking procedures as for any overnight campout. I want to warn all of you not to attempt to signal any other rafting parties who may pass us. As soon as we have had our evening meal we will hold a briefing session, at which I will enlighten you on what lies ahead, and how we are all going to do our part to make Dr. Bonilla's bloody treasure hunt a success, because we will all profit by it, share and share alike."

Doc Bonilla muttered cynically in Tommy's ear, "Anybody who would believe that promise would believe turtles can fly."

As each member of the party disembarked, Hollister subjected

them to a quick pat-down to make sure they carried no guns or knives. When Tommy's turn came for a body check, it appeared that Hollister saw nothing suspicious in his rolled-up towel, so that the concealed two-meter rig went undetected. Tommy was infinitely relieved to have Hollister unlock his handcuffs, at least for the night, as he allowed K6ATX to go ashore.

One thing Hollister's body search did bring to light: the broken Aztec dagger containing the Salazar parchment, suspended by the gold chain from Dr. Bonilla's neck, which Hollister removed.

"Aha—we have a surprise here!" Hollister commented to Slade. "This trinket was supposedly left behind in a buried ammo box at Hance Rapid! I'm sure Dr. Bonilla will explain how he got it back."

Bonilla said tartly, "It never left my possession!"

Tommy Rockford studied the faces of his companions intently, on the alert for tell-tale reaction. He believed one of three persons—Rosegart, Sixto, or Cap'n Jolly—must be sharing Hollister's total surprise that the Aztec dagger had been recovered from its shallow grave at Hance Rapid. But by no swell of a jaw muscle or darting of an eye did any of the three betray a guilty reaction to Hollister's question and Bonilla's enigmatic answer.

Several convivial river parties floated past while they were setting up the commissary table, propane cookstove, and water and coffee containers. The happy tourists waved and shouted. To them, nothing appeared out of the ordinary among Rogers' River Rats.

Whitey Rosegart, engrossed with his usual nightly routine of preparing another of his gourmet dinners, still seemed unable to control the violent shaking of his hands, despite Slade's repeated assurances that "as long as you keep your nose clean, fella, nothing is going to happen to you."

With Slade guarding those on shore, Hollister climbed back aboard the *Titanic* to make a thorough examination of each of the drybags containing bedrolls and the various ammo boxes filled with cameras, radios and personal items.

"For the time being I am confiscating all radios issued to you by Dr. Bonilla," Hollister announced. "Later, if we should need them, they can be reissued. I can't risk any of you trying to make radio contact with other rafts."

Tommy groaned to himself, "The man thinks of everything. I still have my two-meter HT, but if he confiscates Doc's two-meter

rig I won't have anyone to talk to on that freq."

From the drybag numbered 87, issued to Tommy Rockford, Hollister triumphantly retrieved his Luger pistol and ten-power Zeiss binoculars, which he had left behind after his brief struggle with K6ATX at Lee's Ferry.

Their evening meal, served under the white vibrating glare of Rosegart's two Coleman lanterns, would have done credit to a fine restaurant in any city: baked salmon steaks, tossed green salad, hot rolls, and rum-flavored ice cream and cheesecake for desert.

"This," commented Slade drily as he came back for seconds on the ice cream, "is what I call really roughing it."

A copper-colored moon was cruising the cloudless dome of sky like a newly-minted coin by the time the prisoners had spread their ground tarps and unrolled their sleeping bags. They were not widely spaced tonight, but were ordered by Hollister to lie side by side on a sandy ledge where Hollister and Slade would take turns guarding against any attempt at escape during the night.

After dark Tommy found himself close enough to Doc Bonilla to whisper, "I saw Hollister take your CB radio from your ammo box, but not your two-meter rig. How come?"

Bonilla said, "I keep it stowed in my sleeping bag, no room in the ammo box for both radios. He didn't unroll the sleeping bags."

"Good. I've got my two-meter rig stashed away also. You never can tell, that ham gear may serve us in good stead, Doc."

When Rosegart had completed his after-dinner chores and turned off the Coleman lanterns to conserve fuel, the group gathered near the moored raft to share their captor's "briefing."

Duke Hollister seated himself on a five-gallon water cooler, the moonlight winking off the dark metal outlines of his Uzi. He lighted up a briar pipe and cleared his throat twice to call the meeting to order, his body a brooding silhouette under the starlight, like a shape sculpted out of black lava.

"I wish to explain why we find ourselves keeping company under such bizarre circumstances tonight," the Museum Bandit began, his fine modulated voice as casual as if he were addressing a gathering of cultured Englishmen at his ancestral manorhouse in Devonshire. "As you all may or may not know, I followed Dr. Bonilla from Spain to Mexico with the intention of making him pay the supreme price for condemning my brother to rot for life in a dungeon cell in Madrid.

I postponed my mission, however, when I learned that Dr. Bonilla had discovered and translated a rare Spanish document which had to do with hitherto-unknown details of Coronado's historic search for the Seven Cities of Cibola in the Sixteenth Century. Details, I am told, which will mean revising the history books, and which generated great excitement in museum circles and among scholars engaged in researching Cortez and his cruel Conquest.

"The scuttlebutt," Hollister continued as bomb-bursts of white smoke purled from his lips, "was that our esteemed Dr. Bonilla, on the strength of information he had deciphered from the Salazar parchment, had been commissioned by the Mexican government to lead a super-secret mission to retrace Coronado's steps into what is now Arizona. Including a descent into our mighty Grand Canyon, where historians have always said no Spanish explorer had ever penetrated. Having made a professional study of museum-sponsored expeditions, I sensed that there must be something of world-class importance behind Dr. Bonilla's being assigned to such a project."

Hollister paused to repack and tamp his pipe, lighting it with his diamond-crested gold Zippo.

"I decided to postpone my personal vendetta against Dr. Bonilla," the hijacker resumed as off-handedly as if he were discussing a cricket match. "As you Americans would say, I smelled a rat. A very *big* rat! Why would an archeologist of Dr. Bonilla's stellar ranking be shrouding his expedition to Arizona in such secrecy? The information given to museum people in Mexico City was that the document Dr. Bonilla had translated would lead archeologists to a major cache of Anasazi Indian artifacts in Arizona. I even heard it being compared to King Tut's tomb—"

"And that is no exaggeration!" Dr. Bonilla cried angrily. "No discovery of such dimensions has ever occurred in North America!"

Ignoring Bonilla's outburst, Hollister went on, "Once again I smelled a rat. Why should the curator of a world-class museum in Seville bother about relics pertaining to prehistoric North American aborigines? For that matter, why should an economically depressed Mexican government spend the money to locate Indian artifacts in the States? The Basketmakers, the 'ancient ones' as they call the Anasazi, had no direct cultural or historical ties with Mexican tribes. No, something bigger was going on here! Otherwise such a search would have been turned over to an American expert, such as Dr. Sixto

here—no offense, my good man!—rather than to an archeologist of Dr. Bonilla's international ranking."

"If this is a briefing session," Dr. Bonilla complained sarcastically, "you might come to the point before we expire of boredom."

Choosing to overlook Bonilla's heckling, Hollister continued, "My suspicions proved correct. My connections confirmed that Dr. Bonilla's destination was the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River—and that the so-called 'Anasazi relics' he was hunting were actually a cache of gold the *conquistadores* had plundered from the Aztecs in 1540. My confederates were accurate in their intelligence gathering, don't you agree, Dr. Bonilla?"

The Spaniard sniffed angrily. "My only agreement with you, sir, is that apparently I have been betrayed by traitors in highly placed museum circles in Mexico City. I have no further comment to make on this subject tonight, Señor. But I can assure you of this: You will never profit one peso from any collaboration of mine. Even if it costs me my life, which I am sure it will."

Hollister laughed malevolently. "I have to admire your foolhardy courage, Doctor, but I predict you will change your mind when you hear the offer I am about to make—on which the survival of your entire party will depend. Why should they be martyred as were your unfortunate personal bodyguards this afternoon?"

Cap'n Jolly spoke out of the darkness: "Doc, when you hired me to pilot you down the river, and especially to look for a petroglyph shaped like a Maltese Cross, you didn't see fit to tell me that Aztec gold was part of the jigsaw puzzle—"

"The secrecy was ordered by the Mexican government," Dr. Bonilla retorted. "Otherwise I would have confided in you, sir."

"Your not taking me into your full confidence is of no importance now, Doc." Cap'n Jolly said, his speech sounding more like the exiled college professor than a crude river runner. "But it does change the situation. Señor Hollister holds all the aces in this poker game. We are at his mercy. So I suggest you keep an open mind to whatever offer he is about to make. Remember that more than your life is at stake. Why should the rest of us be sacrificed to support your pride? Be a macho hero if you wish, but think of the innocent people who will suffer—Tommy Rockford, Doc Sixto, Whitey. And yes, me, even though I know you detest me for some reason I can't figure out, or care about. Would you want our blood on your hands, Doc? I don't

think you would. Not a devout Catholic of your upbringing. Think about it tonight, Doc."

Dr. Bonilla's chest rose to a deep intake of breath. He noticed that Hollister was toying with something in the moonlight—Friar Salazar's Aztec dagger. Sight of that priceless archeological relic, more than Cap'n Jolly's impassioned plea, seemed to undermine the Spaniard's fierce resolve not to make any bargains with their captors.

"When you put it in human terms, I of course must listen to your proposal," Bonilla said hoarsely. "As a man of science I have no belief in sorcery, in hoodoo hexes or silly myths about a 'pharaoh's curse' such as blemished the classic King Tut discovery, but I will give you this word of warning, sir: Friar Salazar's parchment says explicitly that anyone seeking to steal the sacred gold of Ozar the Aztec will be accursed, even unto the fifth generation. There is also a curse pronounced by Capitan Ventura."

"Despite my dependence on astrological horoscopes, I place no confidence in magic or voodoo curses, Doctor," scoffed Hollister. "Unless you are making a snide reference to the occult forces that steered me and my brother into what you call a life of crime—the voices of my departed ancestors. We Englishmen do believe in the supernatural at times, I am afraid. In the case of my brother Earl and I, it was insufferable boredom with life, not the advice of disembodied spirits, which steered us into a life of illegal adventuring... But as for your Aztec curse, you must do better than that to deter me, Doctor."

Bonilla said hoarsely, "Let's get on with it. If it is in my power to spare the lives of my colleagues here tonight—I will at least listen to what you have to say, Señor."

Hollister's cold blue eyes reflected the soaring moon like twin sparks as everyone waited in breath-held suspense for him to speak.

Finally Hollister said, "This parchment I hold in my hand, I understand, will be yours to keep, Dr. Bonilla, if the Aztec treasure is found and divided between Arizona and Mexico. A Grade A archeological specimen for you to exhibit in your Museum of the Indies at Seville, wot?"

"*Si*, that is so. Mexico promised it to me as part payment for my unique talents as a translator of archaic Spanish."

"Dr. Bonilla," Hollister continued, "I understand that sometime tomorrow we will be reaching the vicinity of where you believe the Spaniards cached Ozar's gold. I realize that without your expertise

in deciphering this Salazar document, that cache might never be found. This gives you great bargaining leverage over me. It would pain me to have to resort to torture to loosen your tongue. I would prefer to have you voluntarily share your knowledge with me, for which I, in turn, promise to spare the lives of everyone hearing my words tonight. Yes, in spite of putting my brother in prison for life, I will spare you first of all, Doctor. As a memento of our little enterprise, and as a gesture of my good faith, I hereby relinquish possession of this Aztec bauble to you."

As he spoke, Hollister tossed Ozar's sacrificial knife into Bonilla's lap. During the time it took Bonilla to string the gold chain around his neck and tuck the relic under his shirt, he seemed to make up his mind about what was probably the most soul-searching decision he had ever confronted in his life.

"Señor, I will do my best to lead you to Quicksand Gulch and the Cave of Skeletons, where Friar Salazar says Capitan Ventura buried the gold," he said hoarsely. "But first we must find the key to the sequence of landmarks. The symbol Friar Salazar carved into the foot of a cliff by the river, using the butt end of his bronze crucifix for a chisel. Without it we can do *nada*—nothing."

Hollister asked, "You are referring to the Maltese Cross?"

"I am, *si*. Your collaborator is positive that no such petroglyph exists in the Grand Canyon, but I do not agree."

"My 'collaborator', Doctor?"

Cap'n Jolly sneered, "Bonilla is referring to me, I think."

After a long run of silence, Hollister said, "Each one of us tonight is an important link in my plan to obtain Ozar's treasure and ransom it off, as is my mode of operation. Even the shivering idiot Rosegart is valuable to me, for his unparalleled cooking skills. And Dr. Sixto here—his knowledge of the Grand Canyon may prove vital to our cracking this riddle. Captain Jolly? His ability to navigate us safely through Lava Rapid tomorrow makes him an essential member of the team. If that makes him my collaborator, so be it. And if we find the gold, transporting such a heavy cargo out of the Cave of Skeletons and down to our boat will require many trips by men with strong backs. In that humble category I include young Rockford, our cook, and my pilot, Slade. So you see, this will be a team effort, gentlemen. And each of you, at the end of our mission, will find you are not working

for an ogre. Each of you will be appropriately rewarded for your participation."

Appropriately rewarded, Tommy whispered to himself. We'll be rewarded with a burst from that Uzi pistol, the same as Castor and Pollux were rewarded. Does he think we are fools not to know that? He would not dare leave anyone alive to someday testify against him. He lies in his teeth and I think everyone here knows it.

Hollister's soft voice interrupted the bleak run of Tommy's thoughts: "Tomorrow we run what is reputed to be the most hazardous rapid in the Grand Canyon, at Lava. I understand that that rapid figures in the clues contained in Salazar's parchment, Doctor?"

"He refers to the 'mightiest rapid in Christendom', yes. Everyone agrees only Lava Rapid fits that description. The time-and-distance factors set down by Salazar also indicate Lava Rapid."

"And somewhere below that rapid is supposed to be the Maltese Cross sign which holds the key to the treasure's location?"

"*Es verdad, Señor.* The narrow gulch where the Cave of Skeletons is located is protected at its entrance by a *sumidero* or quick-sand bog. But to locate Quicksand Gulch, we must first find the Cruz de Malta. Such a search might extend over many miles and many days, Señor. The parchment is not specific—"

Duke Hollister came to his feet, knocking the dottle out of his pipe and tossing the embers into the river. "Gentlemen," he said, "We all know where we stand. We face a very gruelling day tomorrow and we will need all the rest we can get. Let us retire."

Hours later, cocooned in his sleeping bag and trying to settle his nerves by watching the constellations wheel across the black heavens, K6ATX made up his mind as to what he had to do tomorrow.

"I must bide my time and seize my first chance to break free. I have nothing to lose. Hollister intends to kill us anyway."

Only if he could make a successful escape would he be free to rescue the others from the hijackers, Tommy concluded. And the best time to attempt escape would be when Hollister and Slade were preoccupied with plunging down the raging gantlet of Lava Rapid.

Burdened with that suicidal decision, Tommy Rockford found he could not sleep. It was three AM by his wristwatch when another scheme occurred to K6ATX. Perhaps now, with everyone snoring around him, he could sneak over to where their captors were sleeping

and get hold of a gun...

Crawling out of his blankets with infinite caution, Tommy came to his feet and started crawling on all fours along the row of sleepers, heading for the black outlines of Hollister's bedroll.

He had covered less than half the distance when he was suddenly impaled by a blinding shaft of light from a battery-powered lantern held by Tony Slade, hidden in the shadows of the raft.

"Unless you're sleep-walking, Tommy," came the pilot's drawl, "you'd better hustle back to the sack or this Uzi will saw you off at the pockets."

That settled it. K6ATX knew his only alternative now was to dive into Lava Rapid tomorrow, desperate as that gamble might be.

The night watchman's flashlight beam ushered Tommy ignominiously back to his own sleeping bag. Now, Tommy realized, was the time to pray to his Maker for divine help in surviving tomorrow's swim down the rock-infested roller-coaster of Lava Rapid. And pray he did, as fervently as he had back home in Santa Bonita when he was a trusting child at his mother's knee.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A Gamble at Lava Rapid

Breaking camp next morning held an eerie, dreamlike quality for Tommy Rockford. Twenty miles down the river would bring them to the thundering Lava Rapid. Here the Colorado River dropped 37 feet in a run of three-hundred yards down a labyrinthian trough studded with enormous boulders.

White-water buffs considered it one of the most dangerous rapids in the world, but that did not discourage the thousands of thrill-seekers who came to the Grand Canyon every year. Any thought of attempting to swim the savage, swirling maelstrom of Lava Rapid did not even occur to the average white-water daredevil.

"By noon I could be dead," K6ATX tried to keep the prospect from entering his mind, but without success. "Why am I doing this?"

He knew the answer to that question, but could only pray that he could find the courage to carry out his plan.

Once through Lava Rapid, Bonilla's actual treasure hunt would begin. Whether it succeeded or failed, Tommy Rockford knew Duke Hollister would probably murder everyone aboard the *Titanic* at the finish. If Doc Bonilla and the others were to have any chance whatever of surviving the next few days, it would depend on his breaking free of this hijack situation and somehow—it seemed impossible now—manage to turn the tables on their captors.

K6ATX was not concerned with the possibility of being shot in the act of diving overboard—everyone aboard the raft would be too concerned with hanging on to their own lifelines. Dodging the huge rocks which studded the foaming length of the rapid would depend on the help of God. Assuming he lived to reach shore safely, he would

still face the need for food and shelter in the time he might need to somehow effect a rescue for Bonilla and his party.

To provide for that need, Tommy decided to dump his drybag into the rapid at the same time he made his exit from the *Titanic*. Ordinarily the rubberized bag, which measured thirteen inches square by eighteen inches tall, was half-filled when his three-pound sleeping bag was packed, leaving room for an extra shirt, socks, shoes, ground tarp, and rain suit.

While breaking camp this morning, K6ATX added items usually carried in his metal ammo box—Nikon camera, his two-meter ICOM-2AT rig, shaving tools and toothpaste—carefully packed inside two Ziploc plastic bags. The remaining space in the drybag would hold food—provided he could figure out how to smuggle any from the commissary table to his campsite without attracting the attention of their captors.

To assist in transporting food to his drybag, Tommy put on his Patagonia nylon windbreaker, which had a double lining capable of packing a pillow-sized object in front of his stomach.

Everyone was preoccupied with his own camp-breaking routine. Cap'n Jolly was aboard the *Titanic* as usual, pumping air into leaky neoprene compartments so as to have maximum buoyancy for the coming run through Lava Rapid, with Slade coupling the air hose to its fitting in each compartment of the raft and pontoons.

Whitey Rosegart, still moving around like a zombie, had all he could do to prepare flapjacks, bacon and shoestring potatoes, scrambled eggs and coffee for his hungry customers. Hollister was posted on a rock nearby, gun in hand, keeping a watchful eye on operations. Doc Bonilla and Ellwood Sixto were helping each other squeeze unwanted air out of their drybags after packing was completed and the bags ready to have their pleated watertight seals cinched down and buckled securely. The watertight bags would get their most critical test of the trip on the run through Lava.

So far, everyone was too busy with personal chores to pay any attention to what Tommy might be doing. He would have to gamble on that factor continuing. Wandering over to the table to get his breakfast tray, Tommy managed to snatch a morsel or two from the open boxes of food supplies under Rosegart's table—a pound box of

raisins, a couple of apples, a small bag of "gorp," or trail mix. These items were concealable inside his nylon jacket—so long as the breakfast tray shielded the obvious bulge out of Hollister's eagle-eyed angle of view.

Carrying his cup of steaming coffee and food-laden breakfast tray back to where his bedroll had been, K6ATX seated himself cross-legged on the sand and breathed easier. Hollister had noticed nothing unusual; Slade was still preoccupied with helping Cap'n Jolly inflate the rubber sausages which made up the *Titanic*.

A screen of lacy-leaved tamarisk prevented Slade from watching Tommy as he transferred his purloined food supply from his jacket to the drybag. That accomplished, it was a simple matter to pleat the waterproof seals and cinch them down with webbing straps and metal buckles. Neither Slade nor Hollister would be inspecting the contents of the drybags, he was confident of that.

Tommy's every sense was working at top awareness this morning, stimulated by the subconscious realization that this might be the last morning of his life. Was this how condemned prisoners felt on the execution day, eating their last meal? The sun never seemed brighter, the smells of riverbank brush and the silt-laden water never so pungent, the birdsong and whisper of the dawn breeze through the thickets so musical, the cliffs and talus slopes and castlelike buttes so breathtakingly beautiful. It was as if every nerve-ending in his body, every instinct and passing thought was supercharged with awareness, telling him to enjoy the gift of life, that by noon he might well be a battered corpse tumbled along by the Colorado River.

Breakfast finished, tray, cup and utensils scalded and dried, Tommy carried his duffle bag and now-empty ammo box aboard the raft as he had done all week. He picked out a spot midway along the starboard equipment locker as the point where he would leave the raft when they were into the boiling rapid, and clipped his drybag to one of the iron rings affixed to the locker.

He wanted to confide his plan to Doc Bonilla, but found it was impossible. He and the others were concentrating on what was ahead of them after Lava Rapid had been run—beginning the search for the Maltese Cross petroglyph, and, if that key was once found, locating Quicksand Gulch, and Cave of Skeletons and the climax of their Aztec

treasure hunt. For Tommy Rockford, thinking about the future got no farther than the moment he would plunge his body into the churning maelstrom that was Lava Rapid.

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There was a noticeable tightening of tension among all seven aboard the *Titanic* when Cap'n Jolly steered the raft out into midstream an hour after sunrise. His passengers had chosen the positions they would be in when the hair-raising passage of Lava Rapids began, and each was alone with his private thoughts.

Duke Hollister had resumed his station at the prow, back to the river, so he could keep everyone under surveillance. Facing him in the forepart of the boat were Doc Bonilla and Ellwood Sixto, with Tommy Rockford and Whitey Rosegart amidships. As usual, Tony Slade shared the well deck at the stern with Cap'n Jolly, the two pilots standing on either side of the throbbing outboard motor.

The group was strangely subdued this morning. Sixto was not giving his running commentary on the geology of the gorge they were passing through, which changed every few miles to provide river runners with a billion years of geology. Cap'n Jolly was chewing his tobacco as fast as his jaws would work. Doc Bonilla's eye-patched countenance was as inscrutable as a mask, knowing that the outcome of their treasure hunt depended on him. The fact that there had been very few fatal accidents involved in hundreds of raft runs through the Big One should have removed the suspense of realizing that for an interval of some thirty seconds they would be at the total mercy of their skipper's skill and the sturdiness of his boat. But the aching suspense was there, behind every pulsebeat.

They passed other boating parties just taking off from their riverside campgrounds. Some in faster rigs passed them, as if eager to reach the brink of Lava Rapid, the climax of any river run.

The sun was ten o'clock high when the *Titanic* came in sight of one of the Colorado River's major landmarks, and in true river guide fashion, Cap'n Jolly went into his hype: "Ahead of us at Mile 178 you see Vulcan's Anvil, gentlemen. That means we are one short mile from slidin' into the hairiest rapid this side o' Niagara Falls. If you ever prayed before, better pray now."

Everyone stared downstream to where a rough pillar of lava rock loomed in mid-river like a black tombstone.

"You are looking at the core of a burned-out volcano," Ellwood Sixto spoke up, knotting the chin cord of his coolie hat. "We are going through a chasm lined with lava over Cambrian strata from the Pleistocene Age. Out of sight above our heads is Vulcan's Throne, the biggest cinder cone in the Grand Canyon, the source of all the molten lava which spilled into the gorge to dam the river millions of years ago. A lake backed up behind the lava spill after the volcano erupted. Finally flowed over the top to form Lava Rapid. Even millions of years later, the river is still carrying on its battle to destroy those lava rocks, wearing them down, slowly but ever so surely."

Approaching Vulcan's Anvil, they saw other boats and rafts circling the black column, as if performing some kind of ritual.

"Want me to pass on by, chief?" Cap'n Jolly called out to Hollister. The latter, scowling curiously at the milling boats at the base of the huge volcanic core, called back, "What's going on? Why are the tourists waving at that rock like blithering idiots?"

Ellwood Sixto, ever anxious to display his knowledge, answered for Cap'n Jolly: "They are tossing coins to the top of the Anvil to propitiate the great god Vulcan for trespassing on his territory, offerings to win the good will of the ancient river gods. It's a custom river runners have carried on since Major Powell—to insure safe passage of Lava Rapid. Superstitious nonsense, of course."

Duke Hollister glanced about nervously. "I'm not one to run afoul of pagan customs," he said with a sheepish laugh. "No use tempting Lady Luck, eh? Jolly, cut the motor until we come alongside that rock. Those who claim they aren't superstitious by nature can do as they please, but I for one am going to bloody well make an offering to the gods, just to play it safe!"

The other boats had left Vulcan's Anvil by the time the *Titanic*, back under power, glided alongside. Of one accord, the seven occupants of the raft got to their feet and began tossing quarters and nickels and pennies onto the truncated apex of the volcanic core some thirty feet overhead.

"Only the money that lands on top and sticks will count when the river gods start toting up your score," Cap'n Jolly gave warning as he circled Vulcan's Anvil. "Seeing as how I have salvage rights to any dough that lodges up there, I hope you didn't chuck your money into the river, gents."

The moment of levity ended as the *Titanic*'s motor slid the raft

back into the main current. Already, it seemed, the river's flow had speeded up as it neared the bottleneck of Lava Rapid. Another half mile downstream, their ears picked up an ominous organlike crescendo of sound from ahead—the bass roar of the river plunging through its narrowing, rock-fanged blockade.

A cluster of boats had nosed ashore on the left bank, as if lining up to take turns entering the rapid. The surface of the coffee-colored river suddenly ended, the water horizon cutting off in a straight line from bank to bank as the river plunged over a brink into an unseen abyss of unknown depth. From moment to moment they could see bursts of white spray bounce into view above the river's flat horizon line, then fall back out of sight—the first glimpse river runners had of the most fearsome cascade of them all.

Cap'n Jolly swung the *Titanic* over to the right-hand bank and beached it on a sandbar a safe hundred yards upstream from the brink of the rapid, just out of the pull of the current.

"Slade and I will go ashore and scout the rapid before we make the run," Cap'n Jolly explained. "It's never the same. The rest of you stay put. Maybe you can catch up on your prayin'—prayin' that we won't capsize on the way down. It has happened, even to me, leaving us to hitchhike raft rides home."

Jolly and Slade hopped ashore, tied the *Titanic* to a tree trunk, and set off up a twisting trail through the rocks behind a long file of tourists who were climbing to a stony vantage point where they could take spectacular photographs of the long steep rapid and, hopefully, of other rafts sliding down the chute.

Tommy Rockford, fighting to keep his courage alive, decided not to tell Doc Bonilla what he planned to do.

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The two river pilots returned twenty minutes later, looking sobered by their inspection of Lava Rapid.

"River's rough this mornin'," Cap'n Jolly reported. "All of you make sure your life jackets are buckled securely. Before we drop over the edge, lock both hands around a rope or strap. Don't let go until we're well into the riffles a quarter of a mile below. The run only takes seconds, but it'll seem like an eternity."

"If you haven't got anchor chains on your glasses, stow 'em in your pocket. If you thought Crystal or Badger or Sockdolager were

scary, you ain't seen nothing' to what's going to happen to you in the next couple of minutes. If you don't think you can handle it, there's a portage trail along the north bank that any yellow-belly can take if he chooses. Otherwise, this is last call, gents!"

No one spoke. Tommy Rockford knew that even if he took the portage trail, he would be trapped, of no use to the others he hoped to rescue from Hollister's grasp.

"*Vamanos*—let's go!" shouted Doc Bonilla. "Let's enjoy this!"

They shoved off from the bank. Within seconds the awesome suction of the narrowing river caught them. There was no turning back now. All hands grabbed ropes and straps and braced themselves for the descent into the watery hell ahead.

At the rounded, glass-slick verge of the rapid the flexible thirty-foot-long *Titanic* seemed to hang suspended, front half in midair. Then the boat buckled as gravity and the swift current plunged them over the dizzy edge, the rubber raft twisting itself into a letter V as it fell twenty feet straight down into the first trough between waves, straightening with a spine-wrenching jerk as it climbed the next wall of water, bending the flexible raft into a letter A as it rolled over the following wave crest.

Tommy's stomach hit the roof of his mouth at the bottom of that terrifying drop, the same sensation he had experienced on the first big plunge on a roller coaster. Then it seemed that tons of silt-reddened water engulfed the *Titanic* as it bounced off the first rock and into another, the water serving as a cushion.

Tommy moaned out loud, the sound lost under the thunderous roar of the water all about them: "God, if you ever helped me before, help me now—I can't make it without You—"

Clinging to the liferope with his left hand, Tommy Rockford unsnapped his drybag from its ring on the locker frame, got a grip on the web strap, and shoved the bag overboard into the raging flood. Pushing with both legs, steering the drybag to shield his face in case he struck a rock, Tommy made his rolling dive off the *Titanic*'s starboard pontoon, following the drybag.

The frigid brown water caused Tommy to gasp in a mouthful of water, seeming to constrict his lungs against his heart. He felt the awesome roar of the brawling waters muffled out as he went under, his right hand clinging desperately to the strap of his drybag just as an enormous wave lifted him to its crest and then dropped him and

the bag into what seemed to be a bottomless chasm.

K6ATX got a pinched-off glimpse of the *Titanic* rocketing up a roof-steep wall of water on the other side of the trough he was plummeting into. As the raft struggled over the top in a roil of spray, Tommy's eyes registered tiny details: the sun gleaming off Doc Bonilla's shiny bald skull, the silvery blades of the motorboat's propeller spinning impotently in open air, Cap'n Jolly bending his back over the motor's tiller bar to prevent his raft from broadsiding to the waves and capsizing before the really big waves yet to come.

From then on Tommy Rockford was lost in his own watery world, seen only by God. The buoyancy of the drybag helped the young radio ham from being sucked under by the boiling undertow. In the next instant it saved him from a broken neck when they tumbled down a precipice of milk chocolate-colored water to carom off a boulder, then deflect away into another channel.

He felt like a kernel of grain being churned around in a popcorn machine. He sealed his lips against the strangling surge. It was like having muscle and bone being pulled at by myriads of clawing hands as currents fought to claim a victim.

He thought he glimpsed the raft again, but before he could clear his vision he was engulfed by a breaking wave larger than any he had ever attempted on a surfboard. He was vaguely conscious of the kaleidoscopic blur of boiling whirlpools, a wheeling cerulean blue sky, spinning black lava cliffs, then darkness as he was pulled underwater until it seemed his lungs would burst through his ribs in quest of life-saving oxygen.

But the gut-wrenching ordeal was slackening. Battered, slammed about like a chip in a maelstrom, both fists knotted around the strap of the drybag now, K6ATX became aware of a feeling of buoyancy, of a lessening of the depth of the troughs between waves. There was more of the sun's heat burning down on him, and a lessening of speed as the river seemed to level off as he and the drybag were flung like loose jetsam into the dimpled swirling eddies along the left bank. His bulky orange-colored life jacket impeded any attempt at swimming, so he let the current take charge.

The drybag, as if it were a living thing, seemed to be pulling him to the left, away from the diminishing waves at the lower end of Lava Rapid. Atop a white-capped riffle he glimpsed the *Titanic* again, extricating itself from the rapid's grasp, floating sidewise into the

calmer water along the opposite side of the gorge. The thunder of the rapid was no longer deafening. Finally the truth got through his befuddled brain: he had survived a solo run through Lava Rapid!

Reaching slack water, only yards away from a dry gravel bank furred with brush, Tommy Rockford felt his feet touch sandy bottom. The continuing thrust of the river helped, rather than hindered him in reaching the bank. Lava had grudgingly surrendered a victim.

Knowing his first priority was getting behind cover before Duke Hollister had time to count noses and discover he was missing from the raft, Tommy shouldered the drybag and, bent nearly double, staggered out of the water, clawed his way up a mudbank and burrowed into a tangled thicket of juniper and tamarisk. He didn't believe he could have made it swimming without the drybag.

Retching muddy river water out of his lungs, Tommy dropped the drybag behind some rocks and wriggled like a lizard with a fractured spine toward a jumble of broken lava which had crumbled away from a crevasse in the black canyon wall. Some raging gully-washer had come surging out of that crack in ages past to up-end a fallen slab of lava which, when the waters had receded, had settled back to lean at an angle against the cliff's base, like the roof of a lean-to shed propped against a barn wall.

Between the leaning slab and the cliff was a space large enough to accommodate his six-foot length, concealing him from the view of anyone across the river who might start looking for him.

Half dead, every bone and muscle in his body screaming out for rest, K6ATX clawed his way into the cool shade of the leaning lava slab. Once behind its concealment, Tommy fell on his face in the gravel, then rolled over and, wilting like a punctured balloon, surrendered his senses to total rest.

For long minutes he lay there panting, staring up at the underside of the rock slab which sheltered him from the blistering sun. Was he hallucinating? He seemed to be looking up at images cast by a slide projector, using the rock for a screen: likenesses of his Dad and Mother, and his girlfriend Trudy, back in Pasadena. She was K6ZNT, Zipper Nipper Tipper. Then the beloved faces dissolved and were overlapped by another image, what appeared to be a geometric figure of some kind, etched into the desert varnish which coated the shiny under surface of the stone.

The shape was a familiar one, yet it took several seconds for his

numbed brain to put a name to it, a name which echoed repeatedly through the black chambers of his consciousness:

A Maltese Cross... A Maltese Cross... A Maltese Cross...

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut, his senses teetering on the brink of sleep and blessed oblivion. He resisted this escape and forced his eyes open again. The Maltese Cross was still there.

Why should that seem so important? he wondered dazedly. If it is still there when I wake up, maybe I'll remember why...

He let his ebbing senses float off into dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

QSY to Two Meters

A clamor that sounded like humans screaming at the top of their lungs roused Tommy Rockford out of troubled sleep. He sat up groggily, bumping his head on the inclined rock which shielded him from view. That painful rap on the scalp instantly restored him to a full awareness of his surroundings.

The screams continued; they were not part of a bad dream, then. Momentarily disoriented, Tommy regained his bearings and crawled out from under his shelter to investigate.

The explanation for the frightening sounds was so simple he broke into laughter. Two raft-loads of river runners were just emerging from their thrill-packed descent of Lava Rapid, bucking and plunging through the diminishing torrent.

Coming abreast of the bank where K6ATX was standing, the boats were gliding out of the rock-toothed narrows to where the river broadened. The seething waters became simmering eddies mottled with lather, finally smoothing and merging into a serene, glassy flow.

The roller-coaster shrieks of mingled delight and terror now gave way to shouts of relief and the exhilaration of having survived what to many was the most exciting fifty seconds of their lives.

The rubber boats passed on out of Tommy Rockford's view, and brought a sudden awareness that it was hazardous for him to be standing up in such an exposed position.

He dropped to a squat, every ounce of flesh in his body aching from having slept on a rough stony surface. How long had he been asleep? The sun was now funneling its rays into the Grand Canyon at a low angle from the west. His wristwatch confirmed that it was

past six o'clock, which at this time of year was still two hours short of sundown.

"I'll be spending the night here," Tommy muttered, "but it won't be sprawled out on a mattress of rocks. Not as long as I've got a sleeping bag handy."

On hands and knees, K6ATX crawled back along the bank toward the spot where he had waded ashore. He had left a plain-to-read trail, but it was unlikely if Duke Hollister or Tony Slade would have come looking for him. For one thing, he doubted that his dive from the plunging *Titanic* had even been noticed at the time. When he had last seen the raft, midway through the rapid, it had been zigzagging the rocky slalom course toward the opposite side of the river.

A moment later Tommy sighted drybag No. 87 lying where he had tossed it behind some rocks in a clump of willows that was festooned with moss and debris from some past highwater mark.

He laughed out loud at the absurdity of it all—here he was living out a boyhood fantasy of being a shipwreck victim marooned on a desert island, yet he had brought with him all the comforts of home, including radio, camera, food...

Back under the shelter of the leaning slab of lava, Tommy unbuckled the straps which held the accordian-pleated waterproofing seals of the drybag intact, and began lifting out the contents to take an inventory of his worldly treasures.

A snug down-filled sleeping bag. A plastic tarp to keep moisture away from same. Spare shirt, shorts and socks. Ammo box No. 73's former contents: the Nikon camera, f:4 zoom lens 50 to 300 millimeters—he hadn't taken a single photograph on this trip, his mind had been so preoccupied with other matters. The two-meter ICOM hand-held transceiver. Shaving kit, toothpaste, etc. A Boy Scout first-aid kit in a khaki canvas case. An emergency packet containing matches in paraffin, a vial of halizone tablets for purifying water when hiking in the wilderness.

But best of all, the drybag contained food he had filched at breakfast, an eternity ago this morning. Wow! That was twelve hours in the past! Half a day since he had eaten! No wonder he was having stomach cramps!

Famished and weak from hunger, Tommy Rockford made his first raid on his skimpy supply of rations: raisins and trail mix, washed down with water, which emptied his belt bottle.

His appetite appeased, Tommy leaned back against the base of the cliff, hands laced behind his head, and gave a long gusty sigh of satisfaction.

The sigh ended in a gasp of astonishment.

During his long sleep induced by exhaustion and the cruel battering his body had taken tumbling down the rapid, his brain had conjured up many nightmarish images. Among other bad dreams he recalled one about finding Salazar's Maltese Cross, an image his subconscious mind had rejected as some kind of hallucination.

But he was looking at that Maltese Cross now! There it was in reality, not the figment of an overwrought imagination! There it was, waiting to be touched, less than an arm's length above his face! The petroglyph which was the key to Dr. Bonilla's expedition!

Doubting the veracity of his own eyes, Tommy reached up to rub the Maltese Cross petroglyph with his fingertips. At this close range, he could actually feel the chisel marks put there more than four-hundred years ago by Friar Salazar, using the butt of the crucifix off his rosary for an etching tool to scrape through the desert varnish to expose the lighter-colored rock underneath.

A man-made symbol, measuring about one yard in width and height, a sign no one could ever confuse with any Anasazi artwork left in the Grand Canyon by a long-vanished people.

"But this can't be it!" Tommy Rockford whispered. "Doc's parchment distinctly said that the friar scratched his Maltese Cross about six feet up the face of a cliff that was visible from the river. The old padre wouldn't have crawled under this leaning rock to do his carving where human eyes would never see it—"

Then the full implications of his discovery struck Tommy Rockford as he reasoned out an explanation for why the cryptic symbol was hidden where it was.

Some mighty force of nature in the past had removed the slab from the surface of the cliff—an earthquake, a violent flood, or perhaps water seeping into cracks in the cliff.

Freezing, the expanding ice had pried off a thick layer of stone. In falling six feet to the ground, the slab had landed upside down and toppled back against the cliff itself. That would account for the Maltese Cross being on the underside of the slab, a Maltese Cross that originally had been as visible as a roadside billboard.

"This means we have the key to finding Quicksand Gulch!"

flashed the thought through Tommy's brain. "Doc's parchment said the Aztec treasure was buried in the third canyon downstream from where the friar left his Maltese Cross for a marker. No wonder Cap'n Jolly has never seen it! This slab could have flaked off the cliff hundreds of years ago!"

How could he pass along this tremendous news to Doc Bonilla?

Tommy was trembling with excitement as he wriggled out from under the leaning rock slab and crawled over to the willow thickets at the river's edge, to make his first inspection of the scene.

The gleam of westering sunlight on the bright silver-colored raft and pontoons of a river-running rig drew Tommy's attention down-canyon and perhaps a hundred yards farther along the river, on the bank opposite his own landing place. Even at this distance he recognized the raft as Cap'n Jolly's *Titanic*.

"Too bad I don't have Duke Hollister's binoculars—"

Then Tommy's resourceful brain hit on a substitute for field glasses. The zoom lens of his Nikon single lens reflex camera!

Scuttling back to his opened drybag, Tommy removed the long-barreled telephoto lens from its protective zipper bag and attached it to the box of the 35mm Nikon.

Returning to the riverbank, Tommy peered through the eyepiece of the camera and aimed it through the camouflaging willow thicket, twisting the focusing ring to bring the river boat into needle-sharp definition.

With the lens wide open at f:4, the highly magnified view on the Nikon's focusing screen revealed Cap'n Jolly and Tony Slade standing in waist-deep water, applying vulcanized patches to rips in a deflated compartment of the starboard pontoon where it had been sliced open by contact with sharp-edged rocks on the way through Lava Rapid.

Puttering around on board the raft was Whitey Rosegart, always rummaging in his refrigerated boxes, getting ready for the evening meal. His commissary table, propane stove and beverage coolers had already been set up on a belt of sand nearest the water.

Higher up on shore, Duke Hollister was squatting on a rock ledge, smoking a cigar and gesturing, apparently delivering a lecture of some kind to a captive audience consisting of Doc Bonilla and Ellwood Sixto.

All hands present and accounted for. The *Titanic* had not lived up to its ominous name today—and surely it would never face a more severe test than riding a rampaging river through Lava Rapids.

As he continued to watch, Tommy saw Bonilla and Sixto clambering back aboard the raft to unfasten their drybags from the safety rings, tossing them ashore before retrieving the ammo boxes containing their personal possessions.

Tommy, following their movements through the 300mm telephoto lens, felt as if he was watching a silent movie. Bonilla and Sixto shouldered their drybags and began working their way along the narrow strip of beach, obviously to select the spot roomy enough to spread their bedrolls for the night.

Because there was very little level open ground available for bed sites, Duke Hollister was apparently not enforcing last night's rule to place their sleeping bags side by side.

Sixto climbed up into the rocks and brush and found a higher spot for his bedroll. Doc Bonilla picked his way farther along the water's edge, heading upstream until he, too, located a level clear space suitable for a camp. The spot he had chosen, Tommy noted, was hidden from view of the boat landing by an outjut of black lava.

Slinging the camera and its clumsy zoom lens behind his back, Tommy crawled with painful slowness along the river bank for the length of a football field, making sure that he kept low to the ground. This put him directly opposite Doc Bonilla's campsite across the river, fifty yards upstream from the moored *Titanic*. One flash of sunlight on his camera lens could spell disaster if it caught Duke Hollister's attention.

K6ATX wondered what the Museum Bandit's reaction had been when he discovered that one of his passengers, together with his matching drybag, had vanished somewhere en route through Lava Rapid. It would be naive to assume that Hollister had written him off as drowned, not until he had actually seen Tommy's corpse.

The river was a hundred-odd feet wide at this point. Tommy was separated from Doc Bonilla by space less than a forty-yard punt. To continue the football analogy, the two were still as far apart as a sandlot ball game and the Super Bowl.

Training his makeshift telescope on Doc Bonilla, Tommy watched as his elderly Spanish friend fumbled inside his drybag to pull out his ground tarp and sleeping bag. If only he could let the old man know that he had found the key which could unlock the secret of the legendary gold of Ozar the Aztec!

It was frustrating to realize that Doc Bonilla's bedroll contained

a two-meter radio to match Tommy's own rig. But what good did that do him? You don't pick up a ham rig, dial a number, and make a bell ring at the receiving end. They had no listening sked. Bonilla had no reason for monitoring the band, now or at any time.

Momentarily blinded when he swung the telephoto lens too far down-canyon and brought the sun into view, Tommy was reminded of a Sierra Club trip he had taken up in Washington State a couple of years back. His group was camped in the high Goat Rocks of the Cascade Range when they had communicated by heliograph with another party of mountain climbers perched on Anvil Rock, midway up Mount Rainier's glaciated cone, twenty air-line miles distant. When signalling by sun-flashes, a pocket mirror was as effective as a fifty-foot mirror would be.

Tommy was also reminded of history he had read about frontier days right here in Arizona Territory, when Geronimo's Apaches were on the warpath. The Army's cavalry posts had triumphed over Indian smoke signals by communicating across vast distances of mountain and desert terrain by means of a chain of heliograph stations.

"That's it! *That's it!*" Tommy exclaimed. "A little combination of ham radio and Old Man Sunshine is how I can communicate with Doc Bonilla! I'll heliograph him! Thank God hams know Morse code!"

Heart pounding with excitement, Tommy Rockford laid his camera aside and made the long crawl back to where he had left his camping gear under the Maltese Cross rock. It took but a moment to open his drybag again and extract his pocket shaving mirror and two-meter rig.

When he got back to where he had left his camera, he saw that Doc Bonilla had finished spreading his bedroll and had gone down to the river with towel and soap. Stripped naked, at the moment he was standing knee-deep in the river, taking a bath in its frigid muddy waters. Swinging his telephoto lens to the left—making sure the lens hood was extended to keep out the low-slanting sun this time—Tommy checked on the whereabouts of the other campers.

Satisfied that no one was near Bonilla's camp, K6ATX returned to the project at hand with fresh confidence that he could pull it off successfully. Lying down on his stomach so as to steady both arms, Tommy polished his hand mirror against his baseball jersey and then held it out with his left hand to pick up the blinding disk of the sun,

being careful to tilt the glass to the right so that no one near the *Titanic* would catch sight of a sun-flash.

The spot of laser-bright light transmitted by the looking glass was a plainly visible white disk projected on the black scarp across the river, above and behind Bonilla's campsite. No one could see the mirror flash as long as they were outside the path of that narrow beam.

Pretending the spot of sunlight was a pointer controlled by a computer mouse, Tommy dragged the spot down the rocks, across the brushy ledge, and along the sandy slope to the river. Then he moved with infinite care to bring the bright spot to bear squarely on the face of the one-eyed man bathing himself at the river's edge.

Doc Bonilla was soaping his neck and shoulders, facing the river, when Tommy shone the mirror's beam squarely in his face. The old man winced when the light struck his single eye—and lifted his gaze to squint across the river to where some bright object seemed to be blinking at him from a thicket of brush on the opposite bank.

Holding the mirror rock-steady with his left hand, Tommy Rockford shuttered the beam with his right palm. Lifting his hand, he made the flashing light visible to Doc Bonilla again.

Lifting and dropping his hand to intermittently blot out the mirror's ray, Tommy Rockford was now imitating a Navy signalman's shipboard blinker light as he beamed a string of dots and dashes on a laser-straight path across the river: EA7WK...QSY 2 MTR...K6ATX.

"QSY 2 MTR" translated "*Meet me on two meters.*"

Three times he repeated the cryptic message, remembering how often he had heard would-be hams complaining because they had to learn such an old-fashioned, "useless" method of communication as Morse code in order to qualify for an FCC license. Where would he be without a knowledge of the wireless telegraph code now?

Lowering the mirror, K6ATX peered across the surging Colorado River in time to see Doc Bonilla wave a hand to confirm his reception of the transmission. Then, naked as a plucked jaybird, the old man scrambled up the bank to get his own two-meter rig out of his sleeping bag.

EA7WK and K6ATX were on the verge of a Grand Canyon QSO.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In Quest of Quicksand

Keeping Doc Bonilla in the field of his camera's telephoto lens, Tommy saw the old man lift his two-meter rig to speak, but his rich Hispanic voice issued simultaneously in lip-sync from the receiver Tommy was holding to his ear:

“Blessed be to God, can that really be you, Tomás? Over.”

K6ATX thumbed his transmit button.

“In the flesh, Doc! It’s no big deal. By some miracle I made it down Lava Rapid without getting my skull smashed. Floundered ashore on this bank. Did you folks enjoy your wet toboggan slide?”

Tommy saw Doc Bonilla go back to his bedroll, pull on a pair of bathing trunks, and seat himself in the shade of a juniper. The old man appeared to be having trouble coping with the oppressive July heat that built up in midday in the pit of the Grand Canyon.

“We suffered no casualties. But I am enduring a living hell, being kept prisoner this way. I have no faith that Duke Hollister will keep his promise to spare my life even if I lead him to the Cave of Skeletons. But tell me, how could you have fallen overboard? You are lucky to be alive.” Bonilla’s voice choked with emotion. “I—I had mourned you for lost, and I love you like a son, Tomás.”

K6ATX returned, “That goes double for me, Doc... Hey, I dove off the raft—I didn’t fall! Why, you ask? I’m not being held prisoner by Hollister and Slade, am I? As long as I’m free, we may have a chance to outwit those scoundrels... I’m glad you’re taking a realistic attitude toward Hollister not keeping his phoney promises. Tell me, Doc, in that group, is there anyone we *can* trust? I wonder if you’re as skeptical about everybody as I am?”

There was a long pause, during which Bonilla sorted out his thoughts before EA7WK's return signal crossed the river: "I can only tell you my personal opinion about where the loyalties of our group lie, Tomás.

"We know that one of them could be the burglar who invaded your home in Santa Bonita and read my letter to you. We know someone drugged my coffee that night at Hance Rapid, robbed me of the parchment while I lay unconscious, and then buried it.

"We know you overheard one of our number having a nighttime QSO with Hollister listening out on the river in his black launch. But who? I go down the list a thousand times and get no answers. Capitan Jolly is obviously in league with Hollister and Slade—I suspected that from the day we left Lee's Ferry, I think. That is obvious. But he did not attend the beach party, so it was not he who doped my coffee. Since the *cociñero*, the cook Rosegart, is working for Capitan Jolly and has for years, I must assume he is also in Hollister's camp, although he is too handicapped to be a threat to us. Which leaves Ellwood Sixto. What is your opinion of *him*, Tomás?"

K6ATX took time out to make sure no one on the opposite bank was approaching Bonilla's campsite for any reason. The telephoto lens showed Cap'n Jolly back on the deck of the *Titanic*, apparently pumping air into his four-man auxiliary raft *Cantsink*, as the others looked on. It would be a disaster if Duke Hollister or his pilot Slade caught the old Spaniard using a radio; all the radios had supposedly been confiscated.

"To tell you the truth, Doc, I trust no one! Not even my own mother, in a situation like ours. Sixto has been your colleague in the museum business for years, so your appraisal of his character would be acceptable to me. How do you rate him? Over."

"He is the only person I feel I can safely confide in, Tomás. I agree, Ellwood can be officious, he has no sense of humor, he can be very irritating at times with his pomposity, but I am positive he would never sell out to a beast like Hollister. Tomás, what is your plan of attack? How can you tackle this situation when the enemy holds all the trump cards in the deck? Over."

K6ATX answered, "Right at the moment, I haven't the vaguest idea what to do, Doc. But I'll think of something...Enough of this gloom-and-doom talk! Right now I want you to brace yourself for some wonderful news for a change. *I have located the Maltese Cross!*"

Through his camera lens, Tommy saw Doc Bonilla's head jerk back as if from an electric shock.

"Tomás—are you jesting? Are you positive? Where? Where?"

"You see the break in the cliffs—the only opening—upstream from where you know my present QTH is? About a hundred yards."

Tommy saw Dr. Bonilla's head turn as he squinted his single eye to scan the cliffs across the river. Then he nodded before speaking: "I see the defile, yes. My eyesight isn't good enough to make out the Maltese Cross at this distance—"

"It isn't visible from the river," K6ATX said, and went on to explain how the face of the rock where the friar had carved his petroglyph had flaked off the cliff itself and in falling had turned the Maltese Cross over so that it now faced the cliff. "Now I want you to listen very closely to what I am about to say. Okay?"

Doc Bonilla seemed short of breath as he returned, "I am listening very hard, *amigo!* For some reason I had not considered that the Maltese Cross might have been on the opposite side of the river. I kept visualizing it—and the three side canyons including Quicksand Gulch—as being on this bank, mostly because there is a narrow strip of beach along the base of these cliffs, along which Capitan Ventura and his men could have carried the gold. Over."

"All right, Doc. You and I now hold the answer to Ozar's puzzle... But first we have to gain the upper hand over Hollister and his stooge Slade—a big order to fill. So keep stalling him. Pretend ignorance. Tell him the parchment indicates that the Maltese Cross might be several leagues down the river from Lava Rapid. Don't worry, Hollister will keep searching for it if it takes weeks, knowing he can't explore every one of the scores of side canyons opening on the river—there must be hundreds of them. *Comprendo?* Over."

The ecstasy had left Dr. Bonilla's voice and was replaced by a profound dejection as he replied, "I understand. I will keep stalling the Museum Bandit as long as possible, knowing that when he decides to abandon the search, he will kill me. But tell me, Tomás—what is your own situation? You have no weapon, no food, no means of crossing the river. I implore you, do not attempt to swim over. The river is boiling with rip currents and whirlpools waiting to drag you down. Do not imperil your own life to save mine! Over."

Tommy said reassuringly, "I am physically okay, Doc, and I have food enough in my drybag to last me a little while. I will work out

some kind of plan to cross the river safely, because I want to locate Quicksand Gulch and the Cave of Skeletons on my own as soon as possible."

"You are not afraid of the—the Aztec curse? Over."

"Puh-leeze, Doc—don't insult my intelligence! Once I find the cache of gold, maybe I can rig up some sort of trap to catch the Duke and his partner, using the treasure for bait. Maybe I could bring Hollister a piece of Aztec gold to prove I've found the cache, you know? And lure him into my trap. How does that sound?"

Dr. Bonilla reacted as if he were totally baffled. "Bueno, but for one trifling detail, Tomás. What is your trap? Over."

Tommy laughed. "I haven't worked out that little item yet, but I'll come up with something tomorrow. Now Doc, I think our best ally at the moment is our ham radio gear. I realize you can't operate as freely as I can, but every hour on the hour I will transmit on this frequency, and I hope you can do the same at ten minutes after each hour. If I don't hear you, I will know you are under too close surveillance to operate. Before I sign clear, is there anything else you want to tell me?"

Tommy saw the old Spaniard peering apprehensively in the direction of the *Titanic* to make sure no one was coming within earshot of his campsite. He was safe enough. At the moment, Cap'n Jolly was helping Hollister install his outboard motor on the auxiliary raft, with Sixto and Rosegart as bored spectators.

Then Bonilla continued, "I have two things to say, Tomás. First of all, Duke Hollister knows there is a real possibility that you went overboard on purpose and survived your swim down the rapids. It made him very suspicious that your drybag happened to disappear along with you—an unlikely coincidence. He is a devilishly perceptive man!"

"The other information I have for you is that he and Cap'n Jolly are now inflating the *Titanic*'s small rubber boat. Hollister will use it for cruising up and down the river, searching the cliffs for the Maltese Cross on both banks. How many days we can count on them doing that, I dare not guess, especially since we know their search is doomed to failure. Whenever they tire of looking for the Maltese Cross, I guess my days are numbered."

K6ATX knew from the way Bonilla's voice was breaking up that he was laboring under intolerable emotional strain.

"Muy bien, Doc. I figure Hollister will start his search for the Maltese Cross early tomorrow morning. While he's away from camp I will see what I can do about crossing the river somehow. With another night's sleep I'll be rarin' to go. I'm signing off now. Remember—monitor this frequency every hour on the hour if possible, and I will do the same at ten after. Adios, my friend."

"Vaya con Dios! The fresh hope you are giving me will sustain my soul. I will be monitoring two meters every hour on the hour whenever possible. Adios and buena fortuna."

Restoring his ICOM-2AT to its belt holster, Tommy Rockford began his slow return to his secret camp, his brain inventing and rejecting schemes of how to turn the tables on Hollister and Slade. The situation, he realized, was growing ever more perilous.

Perhaps the most reasonable thing to do would be for him to attempt to flag down the next passing raft of river runners, explain the desperate situation to them, and have them notify the Park Service as soon as they reached their take-out destination at Lake Mead, which would bring a Park Service helicopter with a SWAT team to capture Hollister.

However, that plan would entail unacceptable risks. If hostile eyes saw Tommy flag down a raft below Lava Rapids—even if Tommy boarded the raft to guarantee his own escape, which was unthinkable—then it would be the same as sealing the doom of Doc Bonilla and Ellwood Sixto.

He pondered the vague idea he had mentioned to Doc Bonilla—that he first locate Quicksand Gulch and the Cave of Skeletons, obtain a sample relic from the cache of Aztec gold, and use it as bait to entice Duke Hollister into some sort of trap. Ah, there was the rub. What trap? Where? Viewed from every angle, Tommy Rockford found the situation totally hopeless. But maybe after a long night's sleep, his outlook would improve.

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An hour before sunrise Tommy Rockford was crawling out of his sleeping bag, refreshed from having slept on a mattress of leaves and twigs instead of rocks. Across the river, Duke Hollister and his party would be feasting on another of Whitey Rosegart's tasty breakfasts, but K6ATX felt lucky to have a few mouthfuls of gorp. In lieu of coffee, he was forced to drink water from the river—water

so silt-laden that a spoonful of it would reveal a residue of cinnamon-colored grains.

Returning to the riverbank thickets, K6ATX trained his 300mm camera lens on the *Titanic* again. He was just in time to see Duke Hollister boarding the four-man boat, with Cap'n Jolly manning the outboard motor. The little craft put-putted out into the river and headed downstream. Tony Slade remained on guard in camp.

His first line of attack, K6ATX decided, was to move camp over to the north side of the river. He remembered that Cap'n Jolly kept a Winchester .30-30 in one of the lockers aboard the *Titanic*, and an opportunity might present itself after dark tonight to sneak onto the raft and see if Hollister had permitted his tobacco-chewing pilot to keep the rifle.

Once that weapon was in his hands, Tommy knew he could handle their captors. On the other hand, if Cap'n Jolly was not one of Hollister's outlaw crew, then the Winchester had probably been jettisoned into the river by now.

Tommy Rockford watched Hollister's rubber boat until it vanished in the distance. He noticed that Cap'n Jolly was not using the motor except as a steering rudder, letting the dinghy drift with the lazy current. He was keeping it as close to the north bank as possible, giving Hollister the best chance to study every square yard of cliff surface in search of Friar Salazar's Maltese Cross.

Putting the *Titanic* camp back into the Nikon's field of view, Tommy saw Sixto and Bonilla engaged in heavy conversation near the commissary table, where faithful Whitey Rosegart was flattening tin cans and attending to the garbage. Tony Slade had rigged himself a tarp to give him shade on the deck of the *Titanic*, and had stationed himself there, standing watch over the others. Hollister's seal of security was so tight that Tommy found himself despairing of ever being able to penetrate it.

K6ATX turned his attention to a tangle of sun-bleached drift logs which had accumulated near the spot where he had set foot on shore after yesterday's transit of Lava Rapid. One log especially caught his eye, a weathered stump of cottonwood, the root system and splintered trunk measuring about ten feet long. A recent arrival at the foot of Lava Rapid, the cottonwood snag was on the verge of floating off, and would do so when the next influx of high water from Glen Canyon Dam was released to form the daily "tide."

"I do believe," Tommy informed an inquisitive lizard, "that I've found a way to cross the river, even with Slade watching. Doc Bonilla would cluck his tongue and say forget it, but it'll work."

Tommy waded out into the shallow water to give the cottonwood a closer inspection. He satisfied himself that he could easily pull the driftwood free from the muddy bank and propel it out into the current. The tangled mass of roots would even provide stowage space and above-water concealment for his drybag.

It would of course be impossible for him to straddle the log and ride it across the river to the opposite bank, for to do so would invite a slug from Slade's Baretta pistol. He knew the current would drift the log practically under the guard's nose.

It would be no use trying to swim alongside the log, either, keeping it between him and Slade's view. Tommy had studied the behavior of floating debris enough to know that the whirlpooling currents would swirl his log around and around, alternately hiding and exposing him to watching eyes. There were so many details to think of in advance, when one tiny mistake could mean sudden death!

The problem of avoiding Slade's attention could be solved if he tied himself to the underwater side of the log until it had drifted well out of the guard's pistol range. But that left a nagging problem—not having been born with gills for breathing while submerged, he would be faced with holding his breath underwater for perhaps ten minutes.

Tommy's fertile brain had always functioned best under intense pressure. His inborn ingenuity did not desert him now. Spiking the water's edge was a sparse fringe of tules. The hollow stems would make an ideal snorkel tube, a system known to the ancients.

Out came K6ATX's multi-bladed Swiss army knife. Moments later he had selected a pair of tubes—one to use as a breathing tube, the other as a spare. They would be ideal for his purpose, being tough, flexible, and as hollow inside as a rubber hose.

Chuckling with excitement, Tommy went back to the slanting lava rock which concealed his camping gear. Before returning the camera to its Ziploc bag and putting it in the drybag, he twisted the zoom lens down to its 50mm focal length and, lying on his back, got the Maltese Cross on the focusing screen. The meter indicated enough available light at the wide-open f:4 stop for an exposure on color film, so Tommy took a photograph of the petroglyph to show his parents at home—if he survived to get back to Santa Bonita.

Carefully repacking the drybag, holding out only a snack of raisins, trailmix and his remaining apple, Tommy made his way down to the cottonwood driftlog, noting uneasily that it was bobbing on the ripples and had almost worked itself loose.

Using the buckles and straps on the bag, Tommy fastened it securely in the heart of the cottonwood's root system. The neutral gray color of the rubber bag camouflaged it very effectively from being noticed by anyone ten feet or more from the cottonwood.

A sound of whooping and shouting caused Tommy to sink neck-deep in the water, his head concealed in the shadow of the cottonwood roots, just as a big neoprene raft carrying thirty or more river runners, looking like ladybugs in their bulky orange lifejackets, came bouncing and twisting through the last of Lava Rapid's white water. The rig swept on past, the drenched passengers paying no notice to the *Titanic* tied up at the right-hand bank.

Peering up the long spray-spouting terrace of the rapid, Tommy saw no further traffic in the chocolate-tan maelstrom. The other rig, under power, was already dwindling in the distance downstream.

Everything was in readiness for Tommy Rockford's own launch. Plugging his nostrils with wadded Kleenex, he closed his lips firmly around the two hollow reeds and, ducking under the water, walked along the muddy bottom until he was beneath the cottonwood roots. The reeds made perfect underwater breathing devices; his head could be a foot or more under the surface and he could still breathe through his improvised snorkel tubes.

Getting a firm grasp on two submerged roots to serve as handle bars, making sure he would be in position to breathe through the reeds, Tommy Rockford shoved both feet hard into the muddy bottom and leaned all his weight into tugging the log free of the mudbank.

A moment later and with surprisingly little effort expended, the driftlog came free and, propelled by Tommy's driving legs, glided out into deep water and nudged into the current.

Tommy chinned his head above the surface, peering out through the tangled roots, knowing he would not have to use his underwater snorkeling capability until he was passing the vigilant eyes of Tony Slade on the deck of the *Titanic*.

The cottonwood stump had probably been uprooted by high water in some place like Havasu Creek Canyon, since cottonwoods do not grow on Colorado River banks because of periodic flooding. The snag

had not been in the river long enough to have become waterlogged, so it entered the mid-river current as buoyantly as a canoe.

Through the screening tangle of roots, Tommy watched the *Titanic* drawing closer and closer. Doc Bonilla and Ellwood Sixto were taking a stroll along the riverbank beyond the camp, Sixto pointing out geological formations.

Not until Tony Slade turned a curious gaze toward the approaching driftlog did Tommy go under, breathing through the hollow reeds without difficulty—a trick he was sure some ancient Anasazi had invented centuries before him.

Once safely passed the *Titanic*, beyond his two friends walking beside the river, K6ATX swung his head and shoulders out of water and turned his concentrated attention to keeping his makeshift craft angling toward the right-hand bank.

Like Hollister in the rubber dinghy somewhere ahead of him, Tommy was studying every square foot of the canyon's lava wall—but not in search of a petroglyph. He was counting each side canyon as they passed. The narrow ribbon of beach, furred with mesquite and salt cedar and willowbrake, seemed to continue indefinitely, but until he reached the third side canyon below the Maltese Cross, Tommy would let the river do the walking for him, as well as transporting his bulky drybag.

Half a mile below the rapid, his log floated past the first defile in the solid face of the north bank. Tommy paid equal attention to the bank on his left, but it appeared to have no breaks below the one where the Maltese Cross had been located.

Another four-hundred yards, and side canyon Number Two glided past on the right. Tommy suppressed a cry of exultation. One more side canyon to go, and he would steer the log onto whichever bank and get out to investigate. That third canyon might well prove to be the narrow arroyo where, 400 years ago, Captain Juan Vicente Ventura and his steel-helmeted lancers had carried their *alforja* bags stuffed with Aztec treasure.

Rounding a rocky promontory, Tommy's heart leaped as he saw the brush-choked maw of another narrow cleft forming a seam in the solid lava wall on his right. Coming abreast of it, Tommy got a fleeting glimpse of a fissure that was barely ten feet wide, but opening into a wider canyon just inland from the river.

Tommy lowered his legs. His feet dragged bottom five feet below

the surface. Exerting all his strength, he guided his floating driftlog toward shore until he felt the bristling roots snag the willow thickets along the bank like grasping claws.

A spinning eddy began to swing the splintered end of the cottonwood trunk around. A matter of moments and the driftwood would break loose; he would be powerless to prevent it floating away on the sluggish current. But the log had served its purpose. Unsnaping the webbing straps to release his drybag, Tommy removed the tissue plugs from his nostrils and waded ashore, freeing the cottonwood snag to drift away on the bosom of the mighty Colorado.

A dozen yards inside the willows, K6ATX concealed his drybag in a clump of rocks. Opening it, he obtained his two-meter transceiver, clipping the holster to his belt. He stuffed his apple and the bag of gorp under his Cal Tech baseball jersey. Donning his lucky Dodger cap, Tommy was ready.

If he encountered the identifying quicksand bog somewhere near the mouth of this rocky cleft, he would know he was close to solving the centuries-old mystery of the hidden gold of Captain Ventura. But what if the *sumidero* had dried up after four centuries? The thought also crossed Tommy's mind that if this was indeed Friar Salazar's *Arroyo del Sumidero*, from now on he would be invading territory which came under the malignant curse of Ozar, sorcerer, high priest and witch doctor to the Aztecs and Toltecs, who had paid their allegiance to Quetzalcotl, the Feathered Serpent.

With that disquieting thought challenging a practical intelligence which could not believe in "curses," K6ATX walked into what he hoped would prove to be Quicksand Gulch.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Half-Healed Wound

The mouth of the defile was blocked with fractured lava rock which had crumbled from a ledge forty feet above. Tommy could hear the chuckle and gurgle of unseen waters filtering through the rocks, accounting for the trickle which was leaking into the river.

Picking his way over the barrier, Tommy Rockford came in view of a verdant oasis locked in between sterile walls of stone.

A hollow-trunked cottonwood—always a sign of water near at hand—grew tall and gnarly at the edge of a level fan of sand and gravel which carpeted the defile from one side to the other, a spread of yellow silt borne down from above by the spring freshets of centuries which had carved this arroyo out of solid bedrock.

Twenty feet across from the cottonwood tree was a table-high dike of rock, veneered with moss dripping shiny-wet from seepage which over thousands of years had eroded grooves in the stone; in rainy season it would be transformed into a lovely waterfall.

The natural dam held back a botanic garden of greenery: vertical walls bearded with maidenhair ferns, beds of lush watercress, myriads of colorful flowers Tommy could not identify.

Beyond the green oasis the arroyo widened out, the rimrocks spreading to admit golden light into the chasm, the existence of which could not be guessed by anyone passing by on the river. There was a whisper of falling water somewhere ahead, either drainage from the recent rainstorm, or the outflow of a natural spring somewhere deeper in the gullet of this zigzagging fissure.

Tommy crawled down off the barrier of fallen rock and started

to walk across the open ground toward the ledge. The result was nearly catastrophic: his first step plunged his right leg midway to the knee, breaking through what appeared to be dust-dry sand. Only by instinctive reflex action did K6ATX draw back his left leg in mid-stride, a maneuver which sunk the right leg to the knee.

Quicksand! He had found the *sumidero* of Friar Salazar—and in so doing had felt the first cutting edge of the Curse of Ozar.

Toppling his body backward, Tommy was just able to seize a root of the cottonwood and wedge his left knee into firm earth. By twisting and wrenching with all his strength, Tommy managed to extricate his right leg from the sucking quagmire.

A whistle of relief ballooned Tommy's cheeks. That had been close! It had also been careless. If he had lost his balance and fallen forward, the quicksand would have claimed an easy victim.

He picked up a loaf-sized rock and tossed it ten feet out onto the *sumidero*, which apparently was overlaid with a thin crust of bone-dry sand. The rock made a slushy *ker-chunk!* and in the space of a dozen heart beats, sank from sight, the quicksand smoothing over almost instantly to display an innocent-looking unbroken surface.

How to cross that lethal barrier to reach the solid bedrock of the natural dam twenty feet away? Here was the perfect example of the cliche "so near and yet so far." The deadly sands extended to the walls of the arroyo on right and left; there would be no way to skirt either edge of the death trap. If he dragged over one of the logs washed down to the rocky barrier by some past flash flood and laid it across the quicksand, he knew it would sink of its own weight before he could scramble across it to the natural dam.

The rock wall leading to an esplanade forty feet overhead on the right was worse than vertical. It overhung the *sumidero*, impossible to scale. To all practical purposes, Quicksand Gulch became impassable right here at its mouth—yet Tommy could see at least a hundred yards up to the nearest bend of the defile.

Responding to hunger pangs, K6ATX got out his trail mix and munched what would be his midday meal. The water bottle at his belt was empty, and he wondered if he should go back to the drybag to get some halizone tablets in case he found an open pool of stagnant water farther up the gulch—providing he could first find some way to cross this deadly stretch of quicksand.

He was devouring his apple when he was startled to hear a sudden

rattling noise on the rocks behind him. Spinning around, he saw Ellwood Sixto in the act of climbing over the slope of loose lava rock. The Arizona official was wearing a small indigo canvas backpack behind his shoulders, to which was tied a coil of nylon rope and his geologist's pick. But what amazed Tommy was that Sixto, the cancer-conscious wimp who insisted on wearing a long-sleeved shirt at all times, was stripped to the waist! Running along his right arm from shoulder to elbow was the livid red track of a half-healed wound, swathed with bandage in two places.

"*Ellwood!*" Tommy cried, jumping to his feet. "This is an unexpected surprise, seeing you—and here especially!"

The geologist's startled eyes were pale green marbles behind the thick-lensed glasses. It seemed to take a supreme effort for him to find his voice: "I—I never thought I'd see *you* again, Tommy. We all assumed you had fallen off the raft and drowned."

Tommy regarded Sixto's half-healed arm curiously. "Looks like you hurt yourself coming through Lava Rapid."

Sixto clambered down to the solid ground beside K6ATX. "Uh, yes. Yes, I did. I—I got raked by a sharp rock when the *Titanic* tipped on its beam ends and grazed a boulder. We almost capsized."

Tommy sized up the geologist's scrawny chest, white as a plucked chicken's and just beginning to turn pink under the sun.

"Where's the shirt, Ellwood? Sun rays cause cancer, you know."

Ellwood flushed. "It's—too hot to wear a shirt. I aim to keep in the shade. And my scratched arm needs fresh air to heal."

Something doesn't ring true here, K6ATX thought. He said aloud, "Why did you come—to this particular arroyo, Ellwood?"

Sixto's eyes flashed defiantly. "For the same reason you are here, Tommy. To explore what we hope is Salazar's treasure canyon."

K6ATX could not conceal his astonishment. "What makes you think *this* is the canyon, Ellwood? One gully out of dozens!"

"Doctor Bonilla confided that you had discovered the Maltese Cross yesterday. There is a strip of beach leading all the way along the north side of the river, you know. We're about a mile below where the *Titanic* is tied up. I walked it in less than thirty minutes, counting each side canyon until I reached Number Three, which is this one. Just as you must have done, although I don't see how *you* managed to cross the river without being seen by Tony."

A scowl notched Tommy Rockford's brows. "And how did you

manage to sneak past Tony Slade, Ellwood? Catch him catnapping?"

Sixto shrugged. "He allows us to walk for exercise along the river's edge. He knows I couldn't go far... Suppose we get started up the ravine here? Aren't you bursting with curiosity to find out if Salazar's Cave of Skeletons is up there somewhere? I think I can hear Salazar's waterfall up ahead, so we know the cave is near."

As the geologist started forward, Tommy grabbed his arm and gestured toward the flat pavement of sand. "Don't even *think* of walking across that, Ellwood! The sand underneath is as thin as water and sticky as glue. I almost stepped in over my head just now. If I had fallen head first... It gives you a weird feeling."

Dr. Sixto shrank back from the edge of the *sumidero*. "The bogs that appear dry are the most dangerous ones," he said. "If it had looked marshy you would have been forewarned. And this quickmire could easily run twenty feet deep before it stabilizes on bedrock. Once trapped in it, there is no escape. You were lucky."

The geologist turned his penetrating gaze on K6ATX. He seemed to be struggling with an inner decision. Finally he spoke in a strange half-whisper: "Tommy, can you give me any good reason why you and I should share that Aztec gold with Hollister? Or Bonilla?"

Tommy Rockford felt a chill run through him as he stared back at Ellwood Sixto. Could he believe his ears? He was seeing a dark side of this man's character he hadn't dreamed existed.

"Come again? I don't quite catch your drift, Ellwood."

The geologist squatted down beside K6ATX and began scratching doodles in the sand with a fingernail.

"Look, Tommy. There's enough treasure in Salazar's cavern to make us both millionaires, tax-free. You and I could move that gold to a hiding place of our own and sit tight while Bonilla and Duke go on hunting for it. They'll either assume it's the wrong cave, or that robbers got to the cache before they did. You and I could wait a few weeks, and return here to claim what is rightfully ours. *You* found the Maltese Cross, Tommy. You deserve to be rewarded."

Tommy's brain was in a whirl. He decided to play along, stall for time until he could figure out how to deal with this hustler.

"We'd be playing with fire, Ellwood. Duke Hollister and Tony Slade are hard-nosed crooks! We have no way of knowing they wouldn't gun down Bonilla and the two of us so they could carry on their search farther downstream. They wouldn't just give up."

"I can deal with them. And Doc too, if the need arises," Sixto said cryptically. "The cache may be too heavy for one man to transfer. What do you have to lose by joining me? What do you say?"

K6ATX had difficulty returning Sixto's reptilian stare.

"I'll have to think about it, Ellwood. Weigh the risks, the odds. I admit I'm tempted. But first, we have to find the cave. This *sumidero* poses a considerable obstacle, I would say."

Sixto nodded in agreement. "Have you had time to study how we *can* cross over? I imagine the rest of the way up the arroyo will pose no difficulties, nor should hiding the gold after we find it."

Tommy rubbed the sandpapery stubble on his jaw, his fingertips making a scratchy Velcro sound. His eyes were drawn to the coil of mountaineering rope attached to Sixto's backpack.

"I'm no lariat artist," Tommy said, "but the thought just occurred to me that I might be able to fashion a noose on the end of that rope of yours and toss it over one of those rocks on the dam across this quicksand area. Once that end of the rope is secure, we can anchor the other end to that biggest limb of the cottonwood and *voilà!*—we have a bridge to cross the *sumidero*."

Sixto stared at K6ATX as if he thought the youth had taken leave of his senses. "Maybe you can do a tightrope act, but there isn't enough gold in that cave to make me risk it."

Tommy shook his head. "No, no. You don't *walk* the rope! We'll grab ahold with both hands, hook both legs over the rope, and hitch ourselves across hand-over-hand, like a sloth hanging under a limb. Nothing to it. Trust me. How long is your rope?"

"It's a fifty-footer. High tensile strength nylon."

Sixto handed over the coil of rope and watched as Tommy Rockford created a slip knot. Shaking out a six-foot noose, the radio ham began twirling it cowboy-fashion around his head, then threw the loop toward an upthrust fang of rock on the opposite side of the quicksand. His first effort fell short. The second overshot the upthrust of rock which was his target, as did the third throw.

His fourth effort to lasso the rock was successful. Looping the coils over his shoulder, Tommy climbed up into the cottonwood and shinnied out along a low-hanging limb until he came to a place where he could pull the rope taut as a fiddle string and knot it securely to a stub of cottonwood. They now had a sturdy line slanting down at

a ten-degree angle to a solid, slip-proof anchor on the far side of the deadly sands.

"I'll go first!" Tommy called down from his perch in the tree. "I'll prove your rope would support a bull elephant."

A quaver entered Sixto's voice. "No—no. If I should lose my grip and fall into that quicksand I would want to be sure you were available to rescue me. You—you are younger and stronger than I, Tommy. This—this is a panicky thing, but I—I'll risk it."

K6ATX moved back off the limb to make room for his companion.

"Suit yourself, Ellwood. It's no problem. You'll make it."

The geologist clambered up into the tree and hitched his way nervously along the heavy limb until he reached the rope. Beads of sweat slickened the pores of his face as he gripped the rope with shaking hands and finally hooked his knees over the nylon lifeline. Then, obviously at the cost of his last ounce of courage, Sixto began his timid hand-over-hand crossing of the rope bridge.

"Don't look down," cautioned Tommy. "Atta boy! You're almost there, Ellwood. Nothing to it! Now lower your legs—"

Moments later the thoroughly frightened geologist saw the solid rock ledge below him and unhooked his legs from the rope, his feet hitting terra firma less than five feet below.

"Bravo! Now I'll try my tight-wire act!" Tommy called out. "Before this hour is out, we'll be up to our elbows in gold!"

Getting a solid hold on the rope with hands and knees, Tommy pushed off into space. A dozen feet below the terrible yellow sands waited, giving Tommy the optical illusion that even the shadow of his suspended body was being trapped by the bottomless mire.

He was midway across the span when an alarming thought burst into his head out of nowhere. *If Sixto gashed his arm coming through Lava Rapid yesterday, why is most of the wound already half healed? He got that injury several days ago and has been hiding it under his crazy long-sleeved shirts ever since—*

Another thought followed the first: *Sixto could have gashed his arm on a sharp object. Like a spike from the broken rail of my hamshack fire escape back home—*

Tommy was jarred out of his thoughts by Ellwood Sixto saying something in a voice which was seething with a demonic hatred, the

voice of a man suddenly gone mad:

"You just made up your mind not to join me, Tommy! I saw it on your face, in your eyes. You plan to tell the others—"

Tommy twisted his head around to where from his upside-down position he could see Sixto crouched alongside the anchor rock.

"Hey, this is no time for jokes!" Tommy forced a sickly laugh. "Cool it! And steady the rope for me, will you?"

Sunlight glinted blindingly off a steel blade as Sixto drew a hunting knife from a sheath attached to his backpack. His voice came in a tremulous, snarling rush as he poised the razor-edge blade over the rope which was suspending Tommy Rockford ten feet in midair: "Why should I share that treasure with *anyone*? It's mine! All my life I have been tromped on, forced to slave for others, subsisting on paltry bureaucratic pay! But no longer! This is the opportunity I've been waiting for all my life! At last I have the world in my hands! Why should I share a single penny?"

Paralyzed with horror, Tommy Rockford could only stare as he felt Sixto's knife slice the taut nylon rope asunder.

A split second later the severed rope dropped its helpless human freight into the quicksand below.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Motive for a Burglary

Tommy plunged feet first into the *sumidero*. His lucky Dodger cap flew off his head and landed a dozen feet away. Before he could even cry out in panic, he found himself buried almost waist deep in the sucking void. Out of instinct he removed his two-meter radio transceiver from his belt and tucked it under his jersey to protect it from the rising sands. He stared up in stunned disbelief at the crouched figure of the geologist from Phoenix, whose lips were skinned back from his teeth in a simian grin of triumph.

"The Aztec treasure will be mine!" the geologist screamed. "And the world will never know how close you came to finding it ahead of me, Rockford!"

Tommy's voice came in a gusting squawk: "It was you who broke into my house in Santa Bonita that night, hunting for Doc Bonilla's letter! You ripped your arm open out on my stairway—lost your shirt sleeve and one of your burglar gloves—"

Sixto made no attempt to deny K6ATX's charge.

"I almost had my arm cut off by a protruding spike in the railing that night in Santa Bonita!" Sixto admitted. "I nearly passed out from loss of blood before I could bandage myself. Didn't dare go to an emergency clinic. And on the river run I couldn't let you see my right arm had been injured or you might have guessed it was I who intercepted Bonilla's letter."

K6ATX could only stare. Finally he said, "But why—"

Sixto's mouth was twisted into a lunatic's grin now as he savored his moment of victory. "Why did I want to have a look at Bonilla's letter? Because Duke Hollister had promised me a king's ransom if

I could find out for sure what Bonilla was going to the Grand Canyon to hunt for—something infinitely more valuable than Indian artifacts. I didn't know myself at the time—”

“You were in cahoots with Hollister even then?”

Sixto nodded. “Don't you know how the Museum Bandit operates? He makes an ‘interesting offer’ to a museum employee—a year's tax-free salary in my case—in exchange for a ‘little cooperation.’ Duke had learned that I had been chosen as a legal observer to go on this joint Mexican-American expedition with Dr. Bonilla, so he approached me in Phoenix. He was taken aback to learn that even I didn't know the true purpose of the expedition. But I did happen to mention in passing that Bonilla planned to take you along because you had apparently saved his life on San Miguel Island last year. He wanted to reward you by sharing an archeological event equal to the discovery of King Tut's tomb.”

“But how did you know Doc had written me a letter?”

“On his way through Phoenix, Dr. Bonilla told me he had written you with what he called the ‘details,’ and hoped to find your acceptance when he got to Flagstaff. I mentioned this to Duke Hollister. He believed that letter would tell us the true nature of Dr. Bonilla's expedition, so he had me fly over to Santa Bonita to pry the information out of you.”

Tommy Rockford could feel the inexorable mounting of cold liquid quicksand over his navel.

“Except that I wasn't home, and the letter didn't contain the details Hollister hoped to get—”

Sixto was struggling with his backpack harness. “Yes. It seemed like a logical idea at the time. I rented a car at your airport and drove to the address I found in the phone book—only to learn from neighbors that you were over in Death Valley for the weekend on some kind of ham radio business, that you had been reported missing, and that your parents had left to investigate. That meant your house was unoccupied. I figured Doctor Bonilla's letter had reached Santa Bonita during your absence, and that I would find it in your mail box. But your mail is delivered through a slot in the door. That meant I had to get inside—”

“So you bought a pair of black gloves in Goleta—”

“Yes. I turned burglar. I waited until after midnight. The patio door was unlatched. I hunted until I found your accumulated mail

piled on the desk in your radio room over the garage. I was in the act of reading Bonilla's letter when you suddenly appeared on the scene. I panicked. I was lucky to escape as I did, though I ran the risk of getting tetanus poisoning when I ripped my arm on that rusty spike. Fortunately, no infection set in. Antibiotic ointment spared me that agony. I flew back to Phoenix and made my report in person to Duke Hollister—”

Tommy said, “But Doc's letter didn't mention Aztec gold!”

“No. But it was sufficiently secretive and urgent, along with the 'Aaron Velarde' pseudonym, that Hollister was convinced Bonilla was onto something very big, so he arranged to follow us into the Grand Canyon. Bonilla finally told me about the Aztec cache, the morning you arrived in Flagstaff. I went to a pay phone and told Duke the news, but he had already made his arrangements.”

“With you planted as his spy on Bonilla's crew.”

“Exactly—reporting to Hollister by CB radio every night. Hollister had already lined up Tony Slade to be his river pilot. Slade had killed a guard several years ago and had escaped from a California penitentiary where he was serving a twenty-year sentence for armed robbery. Hollister's underworld contacts had let him know that Slade was living under a false name, that he was an expert on running the Colorado River rapids, and was 'available for hire.' Slade was more than glad to be Hollister's partner, considering that Hollister promised him a fortune. Slade proved himself as a valuable partner when he captured you as a hostage, and when he gunned down Bonilla's bodyguard at Havasu.”

The numbing realization that he was sinking inexorably deeper into the liquid jaws of an inescapable trap was dimmed in Rockford's mind by the sense that random pieces of a mysterious jigsaw puzzle were suddenly coming together in his mind, too late.

“Then you were the one who doped Bonilla's coffee during the Hance Rapid party that night, so you could steal the Aztec dagger containing the Salazar parchment!”

“Yes. Hollister had planned that before we left Flagstaff. He even supplied me with the chloral hydrate knockout drops before we left. The plan was for me to turn the parchment over to the Duke—”

“What good would that do Hollister? He couldn't translate the archaic Spanish. Only an expert like Doc Bonilla could do that.”

Sixto answered, “Hollister planned to use the parchment to force

Bonilla into leading him and Slade to the treasure. So following out Hollister's radio instructions, I buried the dagger on the beach for him to pick up later. I hadn't counted on the rising river tide wiping out the spot where I buried it. In spite of that, the dagger turned up in Bonilla's possession! Hollister cursed me bitterly for being careless. How Bonilla got that parchment I'll never know."

In spite of his precarious situation, Tommy managed a snicker.

"I watched you bury it that night, Ellwood, although I didn't know it was you. I dug it up and returned it to Doc before morning. I don't blame you for being flabbergasted by its return."

While Sixto was thinking that over, Tommy continued, "Now I know why Slade let you leave the camp today. You passed along to him what Doc Bonilla told you about my finding the Maltese Cross this morning, didn't you? That was stupid of you, Ellwood. Slade will now tell Hollister. How do you figure to go about grabbing the treasure without help? Or getting back across this quicksand?"

Sixto stood up from his crouch. Reaching behind his back, he unzipped a compartment in his haversack and drew out a stubby-barreled Smith & Wesson .38 revolver.

"My ace in the hole," Sixto grinned. "Hollister doesn't know I'm armed. As long as I reach the Cave of Skeletons ahead of them, neither Hollister nor Slade will live to set foot inside. I'll be waiting for them. I will show them the same degree of mercy they would have shown me, once the gold was found."

In a moment of panic, Tommy was tempted to plead with Sixto to shorten his misery with a bullet from that gun. Instead he said in a dull monotone, "Just relieve my curiosity on one score, Ellwood. How does Cap'n Jolly fit into the plot? Is he one of you bad guys?"

To Tommy's surprise, Sixto shook his head. "How I despise that uncouth, tobacco-spitting cretin! But his only sin is his shameless kowtowing to Hollister to save his own worthless skin. As for his cook, Rosegart—he doesn't count."

Tommy murmured, "I guess I owe Cap'n Jolly an apology. I would have sworn he was Hollister's planted confederate. I wonder how much Hollister has promised to pay *him*?"

Sixto grunted contemptuously. "Pay him? Hah! If Hollister had gotten to the treasure first, do you think he would have left any of us alive? He would have liquidated Bonilla, Jolly, Rosegart, just as ruthlessly as he eliminated Castor and Pollux! I'm sure he would have

double-crossed Slade as well. Just as I plan to leave no witnesses when I depart the Grand Canyon. But I am wasting time. So long, Tommy. You won't be here when I get back. You didn't play your cards right. I would have cut you in for half—"

When Tommy looked up again, Sixto was gone.

Left alone, for the first time despair nibbled at the edges of Tommy Rockford's consciousness. He steeled himself to remain as rigid as possible, for the slightest movement added to faster sinking. The only way to cut down the rate of his submerging was to distribute his weight as much as possible over the surface, but he had already sunk beyond the waistline as a result of his plunge from the rope, making it impossible to lay his torso on the sand.

The rope! If he could grab it, he might be able to pull himself out of the grip of the sand, or at least counteract the suction which was pulling him under millimeter by millimeter. But in falling, he had not clung to the rope. It hung several feet away, out of reach. The short end of the rope dangled from the rock overhead, far beyond his flailing arms.

The fierce sun seemed to be frying his brains, but his only head covering, the Dodger baseball cap, was out of reach, still resting on the surface of the *sumidero*, too light to sink.

The bulge of the ICOM-2AT under his jersey brought a surge of new hope. Ham radio had gotten him out of scrapes in the past—it was now his last fragile hope for rescue. He looked at his watch, and felt as if he had just been touched by the Hand of God. It was one o'clock sharp! Back at the *Titanic*, Doc Bonilla would be monitoring two meters. Doc had made a monumental error when he entrusted Tommy's secret of the Maltese Cross to Ellwood Sixto.

Tommy turned on the hand-held rig. He checked the thumbwheels' frequency read-out. Then, thumbing the press-to-talk button, Tommy put his desperate, last-resort message on the air: "EA7WK, this is K6ATX. SOS! Help! I am trapped in the quicksand near the mouth of the third side canyon below your camp. Mayday—help—SOS! Your buddy Sixto is after the Aztec gold, Doc, for himself alone, and he dumped me into this glue pot. He aims to get you and Duke next. I figure I'll be sunk out of sight within the hour. SOS! This is K6ATX—"

He repeated his frantic distress message several times and then switched to receiving mode. He heard nothing. The two-meter FM

band was stone dead. Either Bonilla had forgotten to monitor the frequency on the hour, or, more likely, he was in no position to transmit without attracting Tony Slade's attention.

By two o'clock, the next time Bonilla was scheduled to monitor the frequency, Tommy Rockford would have sunk out of sight under the lethal sands, a victim of man's incredible inhumanity to man. Or was he a victim of a witch doctor's Aztec curse?

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ozar the Aztec's Curse

Silence. Total silence. How many times in a man's lifetime does he find himself lost in the vacuum of total silence?

Tommy Rockford was near to achieving that unique situation now, as he fought off mentally surrendering to the steady but infinitely slow pull of the liquid sands beneath his feet. True, the pound of the pulse in his eardrums was like the steady beat of a tom-tom, drowning the faint bubble of water flowing out of the quicksand bog and under the sliderock barrier to spill into the river. But otherwise there was silence...the silence of a grave.

He became aware of wildlife about him. A huge raven squawked its sympathy from the ledge high overhead. A dry buzzing sound, like wind rustling the spikes of a *sotol* bush, drew Tommy's eye to the edge of the *sumidero* in time to see a pinkish-tan Grand Canyon rattlesnake uncoil and slither out of sight among the rocks.

Closer at hand, a file of predatory red ants was approaching him across the dry sandy lid of the bog, one species of life which could safely cross without sinking. Aware of the poisonous sting the little insects could deliver, K6ATX drove them back with a handful of loose sand. He recalled horror stories he had read as a child, about Comanches staking a spread-eagled cavalryman on an anthill to be consumed by the voracious little creatures, a death worse than—well, worse than drowning in quicksand. Maybe.

Actually, Tommy knew a victim does not drown in quicksand. He dies of asphyxiation before the sand can crawl up to his neck, over his chin to cover the mouth, and finally seal the nostrils. Nature spares a quicksand victim that final mental and physical anguish. Once the

sand has risen over the chest, each breath becomes successively shorter than the preceding one, because the lungs cannot expand against the compression of the sand enveloping the ribcage. Finally each tiny sucked-in sip of oxygen is cut off. Death precedes the final slow, smothering descent under the bog.

Resisting panic and an urge to struggle, which would only drive him faster into his liquified tomb, Tommy Rockford turned to his two-meter rig again, although his watch registered 1:40 and he could not hope for Doc Bonilla to be keeping a sked with him until two o'clock.

"K6ATX calling May Day and SOS and help! If anyone can hear me, I am sinking in quicksand—just inside the third arroyo on the north bank—about a mile below Lava Rapid...K6ATX calling SOS—"

In receiving mode the two-meter rig still yielded only dead air. It was the first time ham radio had ever let him down. But his sanity was slipping, to be thinking so irrationally as to blame ham radio for his plight! After all, his hobby had been the means of saving his life on several previous occasions. His luck had just run out, that was all. Instead of yielding to panic at the end, he would go out like a man. Counting his blessings. His loving parents. Trudy, K6ZNT, his wonderful girlfriend. The God-given talents that had enabled him to be accepted by Cal Tech. Perfect health.

His dreams of a career in NASA's space program? Some other ambitious teenager with a yen for electronic research was even now studying to take Tommy Rockford's hoped-for place on some future space shuttle mission...

When was Doc Bonilla supposed to monitor two meters? Two o'clock? A mere twenty minutes away now. At the rate he was sinking, inch by perceptible inch, Tommy Rockford knew he would no longer be among the living by two o'clock.

He told himself he honestly was not afraid to die. He did not fear the hereafter. But nearing the end of his fabulous teens, with all of life's rich promise ahead of him, each passing second became infinitely precious. He did not want to leave the world—he had too many unfinished projects to complete! Too much to give!

The dike of loose rock which shut off his view of the river also prevented any passing boatmen from seeing his predicament. But he could still shout for help, hoping the walls of the gulch might act as

an acoustical amplifier which could project his cries out into the Grand Canyon and the ears of some river runner.

He shouted, and succeeded only in generating a confusion of echoes piled on echoes, clamoring from wall to wall, mocking him, seeming to retreat inland up the defile rather than funneling back to the Colorado. As if to taunt him, the quicksand made sinister chop-licking noises when he involuntarily twisted his body in a frantic effort to wrench himself free.

A memory came flooding back to him of a time a friend in Hollywood had invited his high school photography club to see a movie company shooting a scene for a Wild West thriller. It was an often-filmed situation: the white-hatted rancher and his lovely daughter slowly sinking out of sight in a pool of quicksand, with the black-hatted villain looking on, unaware that the cowboy hero would be showing up in time to rescue the girl.

Millions of kids saw that film at Saturday matinees across the nation and suffered nightmares later, recalling how the doomed father's mouth and nose and eyes and hair had slowly disappeared, inch by tortured inch, finally leaving only one arm above the surface. An arm which had waved a poignant farewell to the heroine.

But that preposterously corny scene had been filmed inside a sound stage in Burbank. The *sumidero* was a studio tank filled with tepid water that had copious amounts of oatmeal floating on the surface to simulate dry sand. What K6ATX was now facing alone was reality, cruel reality.

Tommy became aware that his breathing was already getting painful. The pressure of the sand was interfering with air reaching his lower lungs. By the time it reached the level of his heart, perhaps ten minutes from now, he knew what he would face: a dark cloud would slide over his senses. His heart would hammer, resisting the restricted flow of oxygen. Darkness would thicken, mercifully insulating him from the final throes of asphyxiation.

“Tommy! Tommy Rockford! Hang on, old buddy—”

So his brain was tricking him now. He was in delirium, “hearing voices.” That was prelude to the closing moments of his life. The voice even sounded familiar. Was it his father? Sheriff Ross Jackson? One of the ham gang at home? Identifying that ghost voice was eluding him.

“Relax, Tommy. Just take it easy, pal—”

K6ATX opened his eyes and twisted his head around toward the

pile of broken rocks between him and the mouth of Quicksand Gulch. If this was a hallucination, it was a remarkably realistic one. Just climbing over the top of the dike of avalanche lava rock was the black-haired, cowboy-booted figure of Tony Slade. He was wearing a blue-and-red Hawaiian shirt, his automatic weapon slung over one shoulder, and one of Bonilla's CB radio units at his belt.

"Hollister sent him to put me out of my misery with the Uzi," flashed the gruesome thought through Tommy's blurring subconscious. The next time he opened his eyes, Slade's apparition would have faded into the dancing heat waves.

But the image persisted. He watched Hollister's pilot work his way over to the cottonwood tree and start climbing the hollow trunk to where Sixto's rope dangled from a higher limb.

"What happened, Tommy?" Slade called down. "Did the rope break as you were swinging across? I can see the short end dangling from that rock over there."

Tommy pulled in a breath, although it hurt to do so, his ribs feeling as if they were cracking from the pressure. He called out, knowing he was addressing a man with no more substance than a hologram in a museum display: "I lassoed that rock... and Ellwood crossed over ahead of me. When I—started across... Ellwood pulls out a knife and slashes the rope. And left me to strangle—"

A string of oaths spewed from Slade's lips as he hitched his way along the cottonwood limb until he could reach the dangling rope and pull it up out of the sand.

"Ellwood did that? Where is the dirty skunk now?"

Tommy's voice came in a tortured wheeze: "He's headed up... the canyon... looking for Doc Bonilla's... Cave of Skeletons. He—he's carrying a gun... Tony. Says... when the rest of you get up there... you won't live to... share the Aztec gold... He'll get it all..."

Straddling the overhead limb, Slade flung the coil of rope squarely into Tommy's outstretched arms. "Belay the rope under your armpits, wrap it tight around one forearm, and hang on with both hands," Slade called down. "This is going to take awhile, and you'll think I'm trying to pull your hip bones out of their sockets and the meat off your arms, but we're getting you out of there, depend on it."

In the act of carrying out Slade's instructions, the ICOM-2AT fell out from under Tommy's jersey and vanished into the quicksand.

"Why did you come here, Tony? Did you—hear me yelling?"

Slade braced his cowboy boot heels against a limb of the cottonwood and began pulling on the rope. As he had promised, the tugging seemed to be splitting Tommy's joints apart at wrist and elbow and shoulder, but the downward sinking was arrested.

The terrible suction of the *sumidero* seemed to increase, as if the death sands were reluctant to give up a victim. Tommy could see by the "high water mark" on his jersey that he had already recovered an inch or two.

"How did you happen to come into this arroyo, Tony?" he gasped out. "I'll never... be able to thank you... enough..."

"Don't thank me—you can thank ham radio," Slade grunted. "Doc Bonilla heard your SOS—on a little handie-talkie we didn't even know he had. He told me what had happened to you, but said his send-receive switch had busted so he couldn't call you back. And then, just like the Godfather, he made me an offer he thought I couldn't refuse—his jeweled Aztec dagger if I would run down here and help you out. As if I couldn't have taken the dagger away from him if I had wanted to! But I told him I'd help. The Duke seems to think you'd be useful in influencing Doc to cooperate with us."

Tommy gritted his teeth to keep from crying out against the painful wrenching and jerking that was slowly but steadily freeing him of the fatal grip of the Aztec curse, quicksand division.

"It's happened again. Ham radio has saved my life!"

Grunting with effort as he continued his tug-of-war with the quicksand bog, Slade panted, "You better believe it, buddy. I put Doc Bonilla on his honor not to try and escape, and started down the beach on the double, hoping this gulch wouldn't be too far away. I turned on the after burner and made it here in fifteen minutes. And in the nick of time, I guess."

Tommy's thighs came in view, raining wet sand. He found the strength to move his legs now, which had been crushed as if between the jaws of a vise before, and heard an applauding shout from Slade as he extricated his right leg and foot from the mire.

The *sumidero* did not yield its prisoner without a final struggle. Tommy thought his left leg was going to break off at the knee before, with a final surge of strength, Slade got him free and was dragging him across the sand until he was in a position to be hoisted vertically to the swaying tree limb.

At long last he saw Slade dally the rope around the tree limb to

tie it fast. Then, bracing his legs securely, Slade leaned forward to grip Tommy's forearms with powerful hands. Releasing the rope at last, Tommy went limp as his rescuer hoisted him around to a sitting position alongside him. The gruelling ordeal was over.

"Wow!" gasped Slade. "That was worse than shucking a wet boot without a jack. You stay away from quicksand from now on, hear?"

Tommy's eyes went moist, and not from the perspiration that was pouring down his forehead. "I wonder—which will be worse—sinking under that sand—or giving Duke Hollister the pleasure of executing me? The Museum Bandit doesn't take prisoners."

Slade gave K6ATX a reassuring grin. "The Duke isn't going to get a chance to do anything to you, pal. So far as he and Doc Bonilla are concerned, your carcass is at the bottom of that bog hole. If a flash flood doesn't flush out that sand and wash up your bones, you will never be seen again. That's what I'll tell 'em."

Tommy Rockford stared incredulously at this man he knew to be a murderer, an escaped convict, unable to understand what had caused such a complete about-face, an attitude that seemed totally out of character for someone who was Duke Hollister's closest ally.

"What's the catch, Tony? Why aren't you turning me over to the Duke? Why don't you put me out of my misery with that Uzi?"

Tony Slade gave Tommy a friendly slap on the shoulder.

"No way, kid! Remember what I told you at Havasu Creek, when you were explaining ham radio to me? I told you I had taken a liking to you? Well, that still goes, triple. I have no stomach for unnecessary bloodshed. Too many lives have already been lost on this deal to suit me. You are all man, Tommy, *muy macho*. You remind me of myself when I was your age. Except I took off on the wrong road, went to 'Nam, came back a junkie, and wound up behind bars."

Tommy Rockford felt a new surge of hope flood through him. Was it possible that this likeable man could have once been serving penitentiary time for a felony? Then a sobering thought struck him: was Slade deceiving him into a feeling of false security which would explode in his face later when they confronted Hollister?

Try as he would, Tommy could not trust Slade. He would never be able to repress a mental replay of the cold-blooded horror he had witnessed at Havasu Creek when Tony Slade had executed the second of Dr. Bonilla's two bodyguards with his Baretta pistol. Of course,

Pollux had been shooting back, so a lawyer might make a case for self-defense, but nevertheless this man beside him had taken a human life as casually as he would have swatted a fly.

Slade began climbing back down the trunk of the cottonwood, Tommy following him. He accepted Slade's supporting hand as his feet touched shakily on solid ground again.

"First item on the agenda, I'm going to track down Sixto. That expendable character is on my list to be fragged."

"Pardon me for having a one-track mind," Tommy persisted, "but what do you have planned for *me*?"

Slade circled the bole of the cottonwood tree, noting its hollowness, with little more than a husk of bark holding it up.

"You won't dare show your face out in the Grand Canyon, at least not until Hollister is disposed of," Slade said. "So for the time being, you will hide out here in Quicksand Gulch someplace. I'll see to it that you have plenty of grub cached down here at the mouth of the gulch before we shove off again. When it's safe to come out of hiding, you won't have any trouble hitching a ride home on some passing raft. There's a dozen of 'em coming downriver every day. Tell me: you dove off our raft a-purpose, didn't you?"

"Yes. With my sleeping bag and food enough to last me a couple of meals," Tommy said. Then he asked, "Tony, what did you mean just now when you said 'after Hollister is disposed of'?"

Before Slade could clarify his ominous statement the waspish whine of an approaching outboard motor reached their ears. Tommy felt Slade pulling him down to lie prone on the rocks. It was a timely precaution, for a moment later the *Titanic*'s little rubber dinghy passed the mouth of the gulch, its motor bucking the current on the way back to camp. Cap'n Jolly was at the tiller, with Duke Hollister kneeling up front, still scanning the cliffs on either side of the river with his binoculars.

"They look pretty disgusted," Slade chuckled. "Can't blame the suckers. They've been broiling out in the heat all day hunting for that Maltese Cross—which you told Bonilla is on the other side of the river anyway."

"What do we do now, Tony?"

Slade climbed up the tree to untie the rope, which he coiled around his arm and came back down to rejoin Tommy.

"We're crossing the quicksand patch with this same rope, and

then I'm going to track down that scumbag Sixto. By now he's probably poking around the cave hunting for that gold cache. He's going to be in for a painful surprise when he comes back out, unless he's wearing a bullet-proof vest to keep cancer away. In which case I'll have to saw off his hips with a couple of bursts from this Uzi."

Slade, who had told the river runners last night he had been raised on a ranch—accounting for the cowboy boots—proved to be an artist with a lasso, snaring the rock anchor on his first try. He lashed the rope again to the cottonwood limb and stood by while Tommy Rockford, fighting to stifle a panicky feeling, made it safely to the rock dike. Slade followed hand-over-hand, laughing as he saw Tommy gingerly massaging his rope-burned palms.

Hollister's partner took out his CB radio and put a quick call on the air: "Cap'n Jolly, Tony here. Call me back, Cap'n?" He said in an aside to Tommy, "Jolly was under orders to be listening in all morning. He'll be—"

Slade broke off as the radio speaker crackled: "Gotcha, Tony, what's the scoop? We're about to pull in at the *Titanic* but I don't see you anywhere around. You wouldn't leave the camp unguarded—"

Slade said, "Tell Duke I'm calling from Quicksand Gulch—Doc Bonilla will explain how we zeroed in on it. Bring along Rosegart's ax—you'll have to chop down a tree and fall it across a quicksand bog in order to cross, but it's no big deal, the tree is about to topple of its own weight anyway. I'll be waiting for you up at the cave, I hope. And Duke, Sixto won't be with us long. That stone of a peach was planning to doublecross us and keep all the loot for himself, so Duke will settle his hash for him. Explain later."

The next voice to rattle the cone of the radio speaker was Duke Hollister's: "You talk too much, Tony. Shut up! The more we maintain radio silence the better. Anything else?"

"Yes," the escaped fugitive answered. "Tell Doc Bonilla I'm sorry, but Tommy Rockford drowned in the mud before I got here."

At Tommy's gasp of protest after the QSO ended, Slade said, "If Duke thinks you're dead, he won't go lookin' for you, savvy?"

Slade stared down at his CB transceiver for a moment, then glanced up at Tommy. "Where's the radio you sent the SOS on, kid?"

Tommy gestured toward the quicksand. "Dropped it in there."

Hollister's river pilot tugged at his lower lip thoughtfully. Then he pushed his CB rig into Tommy's hands.

"You take this radio, Tommy. While you're hiding back up the canyon I can keep in touch with you if need be, at least let you know when we're ready to leave the Grand Canyon and make it safe for you to show your face outside again."

"Okay, Tony." K6ATX clipped the holstered CB unit onto the waistband of his blue jeans. "What's next? I imagine Hollister will be showing up pretty soon. I sure don't want to find myself trapped up in this dead-end canyon."

Slade was busy untying the rope noose from the pillar of rock, the rope which Sixto had severed and left dangling there.

"I can't wait to have a look around Doc Bonilla's cave! But first I've got to take care of that weasel Ellwood. I'll use this scrap of rope to keep him hog-tied until Hollister shows up. Ellwood 'll wish he hadn't been so danged greedy, because the Duke hasn't got a spoonful of mercy in his Limey soul, and the Duke calls the shots. So come on, let's get goin'."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Cave of Skeletons

There was no trail up Quicksand Gulch. Nor had there been four centuries before, when Captain Juan Vicente Ventura had led his little band of exhausted Spanish *conquistadores* up this steep, sweltering defile. The floor of the arroyo was paved with loose detritus, across which a tiny stream trickled before filtering underground to account for the soupy consistency of the *sumidero*.

"Before we start," Slade said, "Hand me the CB radio and I'll check with the Duke. He's supposed to be monitoring the wireless... 'Titanic, come in. Tony calling the *Titanic*.'"

After a few seconds wait the HT sounded in Slade's ear, "Okay, loud and clear here." It was Duke Hollister at the mike.

"How soon are you and Doc Bonilla coming down here?"

Hollister answered, "Jolly and I are badly overheated and Doc doesn't cope too well with heat either. The cave has been there four-hundred years, a few more hours won't matter. We'll wait until it gets cooler. After the sun goes below the rim."

"Roger, Chief. Be sure and bring along Rosegart's ax. You'll need it to cross this quicksand." Slade handed the radio back to Tommy. "Okay, let's go. They won't be showing up for at least three hours. We should be millionaires by then. No use us waiting."

Tommy and Slade found it hard going in the loose rubble, which rose at nearly a twenty-degree angle. The defile had widened out from its narrow ten-foot-wide entrance off the river, to form the shape of a fat comma on a topographical map.

After climbing less than a hundred yards, the scrambling pair found themselves facing dead end. A rust-brown cliff rose fifty feet

to join a caramel-colored talus slope, which led in turn to the base of a two-thousand-foot monolith looming vertically to a skyline capped with Toroweap stone some 4,000 feet above.

A series of wispy horsetail waterfalls from some spring higher up spilled over the lowermost cliff to feed the stream they had been following. After a freshet the horsetails probably joined to create a spectacular cascade, laden with the abrasive ginger-colored silt which had sculpted this watercourse in aeons past.

"End of the line," panted Slade, who was obviously in not as good physical shape as K6ATX. "We sure can't climb up that."

To the right of the waterfall was a flat ledge which some shift in the earth's crust had created by moving the upper half of the cliff back some twenty feet.

"You suppose that level shelf ends at the Cave of Skeletons?" Slade suggested. "The Spaniards who lugged those bags of treasure up here must have come up against this dead end the same as us."

Tommy Rockford sized up the ledge leading back toward the river and frowned dubiously. "I don't think so," he said. "Sixto quoted Doc Bonilla as saying that the entrance to the cave is concealed behind a waterfall. We must be just about there, Tony!"

They toiled their way up the last slippery incline to gain the level of the ledge. Here Slade staggered over to the shade of a gnarled mesquite and sat down to recover his breath. Not twenty feet away the horsetail falls hit the ledge in a cloud of spray before sluicing into the arroyo.

Behind that thin curtain of falling water was a dense growth of tamarisks.

"Behind those tamarisks," Tommy Rockford said, "I'm betting we find our Cave of Skeletons, Tony. That's probably where Sixto is right now, scrabbling around hunting Ventura's bags of gold."

They sat in silence, recovering their breath after the steep and punishing hike under a hundred and twenty degree sun which was parching the juices from their bodies. Slade, reading something on Tommy Rockford's heat-flushed face which was not fatigue, asked suddenly, "Something bugging you, kid? For a guy who's just escaped the worst kind of a death, you don't look very gung-ho."

K6ATX turned to meet the glittering strike of Slade's gaze.

"Down there by the quicksand, I asked you what you meant when you said 'after the Duke is disposed of.' Do you plan to give him the

same medicine you gave Doc Bonilla's bodyguard at Havasu?"

Tony Slade studied the young radio ham for a long moment, as if trying to make up his mind how to handle a delicate question.

"Kid, I'll level with you. Duke Hollister has issued a lot of promissory notes, payable after that Aztec gold is in our hands. In return for Doc Bonilla's knowledge, he's promised to share the wealth. Fair enough. The same goes for Sixto, although he dealt himself out of the grand prize drawing when he dumped you in that quicksand today."

"In my opinion," K6ATX commented, "Hollister is a liar."

"Sure, I would buy that," Slade said. "Anyway, Duke promised Cap'n Jolly a share of the treasure in return for the skipper getting us through some pretty rough water. As for me, Hollister guaranteed me a minimum of fifty thou, just for piloting the *Black Javelin* for a week—with another fifty thou as a bonus after I knocked off Doc's bodyguard at Havasu. That kind of money was supposed to keep my mouth buttoned."

Tommy smiled grimly. "I agree—your boss is a generous man when it comes to making promises. The only reason he spared *my* life was because he knows I'm Doc's protege and that if anything happened to me, Doc would have clammed up tight. The Duke knew he could always dispose of me later, at his convenience."

Slade shifted the weight of the Israeli-made machine gun on his shoulder and twisted his lips into a sardonic smile.

"Once the gold is in his hands, do you think Hollister will keep any of those promises, Tommy? Including my being his partner?"

K6ATX drew a finger across his throat. "When that treasure is in the Duke's possession, Tony, your life expectancy is about as short as mine was out in that *sumidero*. Only you won't have a guardian angel to come along and save your skin like I did."

Slade grimaced bitterly. "Well, son, there you have the answer to your question about my 'disposing of Hollister.' It's a case of which one of us rubs out the other first. Duke made a fatal blunder when he let me carry this Uzi. The moment I'm sure we've located that Aztec treasure, Duke Hollister is a dead man. I made up my mind to that, our first day out of Lee's Ferry. The world will be better off without the likes of Duke Hollister, know what I mean?"

Before Tommy Rockford could comment, they were both startled to see a human figure emerge through the misty base of the waterfall

not twenty feet away. It was Ellwood Sixto, drenched by his passage through the waterfall, his face flushed with excitement. He was carrying a red plastic battery-powered lantern in his right hand.

The myopic geologist from Phoenix did not see them as he strode purposefully along the ledge leading toward the river. Half-blinded by coming out of a dark cave into bright sunlight, Sixto walked over to the edge and, shielding his eyes with his palms, peered off down Quicksand Gulch as if reconnoitering.

"Wants to make sure Hollister isn't on the way up here so he can be ready to ambush him," Slade whispered. "When he turns around and sees us, he's going to get the surprise of his bleepin' life."

Even as Slade finished speaking, Sixto had apparently satisfied himself that no one was following him up the canyon, and turned toward the waterfall again. And came to a sudden halt as he saw two men confronting him alongside the mesquite tree.

"Came out for a breath of fresh air, Ellwood?" Tony Slade called out, unslinging the Uzi from his shoulder. "Cave musty?"

Sixto squinted his gooseberry eyes, blinded by the sun.

"Is—is that you, Tony?" he quavered. "Who's that with you?"

Slade said in a voice as dry as rustling paper, "Ellwood, come over here." Then in an aside, "Tommy, take this rope and when I tell you, tie Ellwood's ankles to his wrists, behind his back. We'll keep him on hold until the Duke gets up here."

"Is—is that Tommy Rockford with you?" Sixto husked out, his voice betraying sudden alarm. "How—that can't be—"

Even as Tommy called out, "*Watch him, Tony—he's got a gun!*" Sixto dropped the lantern, his hand flying to his hip pocket to come up with the stubby-barreled .38 revolver. Flame spat from the bore, but the bullet went between them, ricocheting off the canyon wall to the left of the waterfall.

Slade raised the Uzi, but held his fire as Sixto, screaming with terror because looking straight into the sun put him at a hopeless disadvantage, fired one more shot and then turned and began sprinting down the narrow corridor of the ledge leading toward the river, trailing an acrid scent of gunsmoke behind him.

"I think," Slade drawled, "I'll just have some fun with this sniveling punk before I turn him over to the Duke—"

So saying, Slade started off in pursuit, paying no heed to Tommy Rockford's shouted warning: "That ledge peters out before it reaches

the river, Tony! Ellwood will find himself backed into a corner and he'll start shooting again—he's got at least three bullets left—”

Tommy started down the ledge to follow the pair, impelled by some inane urge to see the drama played out to its inevitable tragic end. The narrowing of the esplanade was now apparent to Sixto, for the fugitive slowed to a halt when the flat ledge pinched off in an inverted V against the left-hand cliff, leaving only the knobby surface of the cliff sloping the rest of the way down to the river, a surface even a bighorn sheep could not negotiate.

Squalling like a bayed animal, Sixto turned to face Slade. He peered down into the arroyo, seeking a way to descend the cliff. Dizzy with vertigo, he got down on his knees, his back to the abyss. Sixto extended one shaky leg over the edge, wedging his foot into a small crevice that would support his weight. Crouched there, staring up at the approaching Slade, teeth glittering like a cornered rat's, Sixto raised his gun again.

“Drop the rod, Ellwood, or I'll clobber you—”

As Slade shouted the order, he triggered a short burst from the Uzi, inches from Sixto's left ear.

Tommy Rockford saw sunlight flash on gun metal as Sixto tossed the Smith & Wesson handgun back over his shoulder. The traitorous geologist's face paled to the color of raw bone as he saw Tony Slade advancing slowly toward him, tiger stalking jackal.

A sickly grin twisted Sixto's mouth as he babbled “No! No, Tony—you have no cause to come after me! I am your friend! We are in this thing together—we can deal Bonilla and Rockford and the Duke out of this! We can split the gold between us! Please, Tony—”

Slade was laughing, peal on peal, as he continued striding closer toward his intended victim, as an inexorable instrument of doom, teeth flashing in a triumphant grin.

“Brother Sixto, you seem awfully eager to share other people's stake in this treasure hunt with me. I'm going to let you tell Duke Hollister to his face how generous you are with his share. Now, come up here with both hands on top of your head. Move it!”

Instead of lifting his arms in surrender, Sixto looked back over his shoulder and extended his other leg to get a toehold in another seam in the rock wall. As Sixto lowered his body below the edge, splayed fingers clawing at the rock shelf, still whimpering for mercy from his advancing enemy, Slade pounced like a coyote on a gopher.

He clamped Ellwood Sixto's wounded arm with a bone-crushing pressure that made the geologist yelp with pain.

"No you don't, my greedy friend!" Slade jeered, holding the Uzi aside with his right arm. "You're coming back up here and taking your medicine, you sniveling little—"

As he leaned down to hoist his limp victim back onto the ledge, Slade saw his mistake too late. Sixto convulsed his body backwards against the tug of Slade's grasp, reaching up to grab the front of the pilot's shirt and pull the river pilot off balance.

Tommy Rockford gave a choked cry, knowing there was no possible way the larger man could overcome the leverage of Sixto's reared-back weight now projecting out over empty space, below Slade's own center of gravity.

Tommy heard the scrape of Slade's high-heeled cowboy boots scrambling for purchase on the brink, then his shout of horror. The two somersaulted below the rim. K6ATX involuntarily winced as his ears picked up the sickening, squashing impact of meat and bone landing forty feet below.

Responding to some morbid force beyond his control, Tommy Rockford crawled on all fours over to where the ledge narrowed into nothingness. He looked over the edge. And wished he hadn't.

Directly below was the quicksand sumidero...

Tommy Rockford took time out to be sick, and not from vertigo. Weak and trembling, he turned and walked slowly back along the ledge to where the waterfall made its babbling splash on the rocks and the rich odor of the lacy tamarisk leaves reached his nostrils.

Picking up Sixto's discarded lantern, K6ATX headed for the tamarisk hedge, shouldering between two of the horsetail falls, and pushed through the opening in the thicket where Ellwood Sixto had emerged into the blinding sunlight a few moments ago, unknowingly to meet his doom.

Something akin to *deja vu* flooded Tommy's being as he parted the lacy screen of tamarisk foliage. Facing him was exactly what he knew would be here: the shadowy, foreboding mouth of a cavern, high enough that he did not have to stoop to protect his six-foot height, and about as wide as a coffin is long.

El Capitan Ventura had led his goldbearers into this very opening in the cliff more than four-hundred years ago. Only one man had walked back out alive: an aging Franciscan grayfriar, a humble

cassocked man of God who had survived to record on parchment the story of a bloody grotto massacre. A year later the long reach of the Curse of Ozar the Aztec caught up with the Friar as well.

Tommy switched on Sixto's lantern, suddenly feeling an urgent sense of time running out on him. Duke Hollister would be showing up at this cave behind the waterfall in a couple of hours or so from now. Without a weapon of his own, Tommy knew that at all costs he had to be away from here and hidden somewhere in the outer arroyo before Hollister arrived at the Cave of Skeletons, possibly accompanied by Doc Bonilla. He wondered if they would reach the quicksand bog before Sixto and Slade had sunk from sight.

K6ATX returned to refresh himself in the chilly waterfall again, drinking deeply and then pausing to refill his plastic water bottle with spring water. Then he shouldered his way through the screening thicket of tamarisks, thumbed on the lantern, and entered the narrow cave.

The penetrating white cone of light stabbed down the passage ahead of him like a laser beam. Sounds were magnified and echoed. Fifty feet from the entrance, the cave expanded suddenly into a vast rock-domed chamber. Playing his lantern beam over the jagged lava walls and ceiling, K6ATX estimated that the chamber was twenty feet from floor to ceiling. On his right, a shelf of basalt slanted up to form a kind of balcony overlooking the floor of the subterranean chamber.

The lantern's beam picked up something shiny lying on the ledge nearest him. On closer examination the shiny object proved to be a buckle on Ellwood Sixto's indigo blue canvas backpack. Tommy checked out the contents, hoping it would contain a weapon, if only a knife. But it held only Sixto's CB radio and a paper bag of food for a luncheon snack the geologist would never eat.

Tommy suppressed a shudder. The very air in this black bowel in the bedrock seemed supercharged with evil and menace. The ghostly "curse" of Ozar the Aztec became a tangible, living reality in this spooky environment.

The cave did not end here. Aiming the pencil of light toward the far end of the chamber, Tommy saw the floor paved with slabs of rock which had fallen from the ceiling in past millenia. Starting forward, the soles of his Nikes crunching on sand and rubble, he tripped on something brittle and fell to his knees. Bringing the light down to see what he had stumbled on, Tommy gasped in disgust. He had stepped on the breastbone of a human skeleton. The toothy skull

grinned up at him as if to grant him pardon for the intrusion. The skull was encased in a Sixteenth Century helmet.

Shivering with revulsion, Tommy played his shaft of light around the floor of the chamber, and saw why Friar Salazar had labeled this eerie black gut in the mountain wall "La Cueva de las Amazonas," the Cave of Skeletons.

Strewn here and there about the area were five other human skeletons, the skulls also encased in Spanish war helmets. Ribs formed white cages of bone. Leg and arm-bones were flung out in the postures they had held at the moment of their violent deaths.

According to Dr. Bonilla's account, two factions, mutineers and men loyal to Captain Ventura, had duelled with each other over the disposition of the Aztec gold. Several of the skeletal hands, Tommy noted, still clasped sword hilts, the blades of Toledo steel still shiny and rust-free. This was the true Curse of Ozar.

The cave held the stench of death, it seemed to Tommy, although too much time had elapsed for the air to still be polluted with the odor of rotting flesh. Deposits of bat guano whitened portions of the chamber floor, blending with the human remains.

Keeping the lantern switched on—knowing if he turned it off he would get claustrophobia in darkness thick enough to press against the eyelids—K6ATX began tip-toeing his way among the scattered skeletons, searching for four bullhide *alforja* bags which would contain the gold of Ozar the Aztec. Then he remembered what the Salazar parchment had said: the treasure had been buried at the dead end of the cavern.

Heading in that direction, sweeping his lantern beam right and left, Tommy Rockford suddenly halted, his body muscles knotting.

A human figure was seated on the rock floor facing him, back and shoulders against a ledge of rock, legs spread in front of him. More than a skeleton, but rather a mummy, bones encased in skin as dry and dark as old saddle leather.

The mummy's face, skin stretched drumhead-tight over the skull, peered back at Rockford, framed by a Spanish helmet of ornately engraved blue steel, inlaid with tarnished silver and glittering gold filigree. The dress helmet of an aristocrat, with a hank of black hair pushing through a rusted hole in the rear like green sprouts thrusting from a hole in a farmer's potato sack.

Untold generations of spiders had spun webs inside the empty

eye sockets. Two rows of teeth showed in a macabre grin between desiccated lips below a black mustache, teeth as yellow as kernels of parched corn. The mummy wore a medieval breastplate on which was emblazoned a coat of arms and a name in inlaid letters of mother-of-pearl. Forcing himself to draw closer, Tommy read the inscription: *Juan Vicente Ventura de Catalonia.*

This seated mummy, this grotesque husk in human form, was all that remained of the Catalonian army captain who had been one of Coronado's officers on the history-making expedition of 1540 which had left Mexico in search of the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola north of the Rio Grande. Tommy saw that the mummy's right hand was resting on the bejeweled hilt of a Toledo sword, encased in a scabbard encrusted with precious stones set in sterling.

For over four centuries, the macabre husk of Captain Ventura had waited here in the Stygian darkness, guarding his cache of Aztec treasure against any intruder who dared enter this Cave of Skeletons with evil intent, even as Friar Salazar had set down on the parchment he had written for the eyes of his sovereign Carlos V.

Tommy remembered enough from Bonilla's quoting from the parchment to know that somewhere behind this mummified sentinel he would find the burial place of Ozar's gold. He played his spotlight past the mummy's shoulder, and found the narrowing walls of another cavern which extended beyond the sepulchral chamber.

K6ATX thought he saw the dead end of the cavern some hundred-odd feet beyond. This cave was carpeted with sand. But dare he explore any farther? Had his self-allotted time expired yet? Would there be time enough before Hollister showed up to hurry back there to see if a treasure rivaling King Tut's tomb awaited? It would be catastrophic to allow himself to be trapped in this tomb.

His wristwatch told him he had only been in the Cave of Skeletons half an hour—although he would have guessed ten minutes. He could safely spend another hour here before leaving to avoid Hollister's arrival.

Then Tommy Rockford froze in the act of turning toward the rear cavern. A human voice was funneling out of the entrance cave behind him! Impossible! But there was no mistaking the clipped British accents of Duke Hollister growling instructions: "We'll give Doctor Bonilla ten minutes to recover his wind, Admiral. We may need him at the payoff. When he's rested, you two go ahead with the flashlight

and I'll bring up the rear. We're jolly well on the verge of making history!"

Terror had locked Tommy Rockford in a paralyzed trance. Then he switched off his light and darkness swirled in as tangible as carbon-black grease.

A film of cold moisture dewed Tommy Rockford's pores. For him, this claustrophobic Cave of Skeletons had suddenly turned into a single-entrance cul-de-sac, a death trap from which K6ATX saw no possible way of making an exit without being discovered and gunned down in cold blood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Mummy's Warning

Exhausted though he was, Duke Hollister's greed had overcome his need for rest. Instead of waiting for the heat to subside after the sun dipped below the western rimrocks, the Museum Bandit announced they would join Tony Slade at Quicksand Gulch at once.

Leaving Whitey Rosegart to guard the *Titanic*, Hollister and Bonilla, accompanied by Cap'n Jolly, boarded the rubber dinghy and headed downriver. As a result, the three men climbed the slide rock at the mouth of the arroyo just in time to witness a ghastly spectacle: the ankles and feet of Ellwood Sixto and Tony Slade being gulped up by the quicksand *sumidero*, mute testimony to an inexplicable double tragedy.

Duke Hollister's reaction to the sight was one of indifference mixed with puzzlement. Incredibly, three of the original seven members of the *Titanic*'s party had wound up interred in this *sumidero*. How and why he would never know—and didn't really care.

But for Doc Bonilla, it was the sight of Tommy Rockford's familiar blue LA Dodgers baseball cap, resting on the dry surface of the quicksand a few feet away, that shocked him infinitely worse than seeing two evil men sink to their doom. It made him feel like a murderer who had indirectly caused K6ATX's death.

That Dodgers cap was final proof that his young radio ham friend had died here, as Tony Slade had notified Duke Hollister by radio an hour ago. The fact that K6ATX had met his gruesome death because of the treachery of a trusted assistant, Ellwood Sixto, compounded the old Spaniard's feeling of grief and outrage.

Cap'n Jolly was carrying Rosegar's camp ax over one shoulder in obedience to Tony Slade's radioed instructions. Hollister broke the shocked silence by saying, "Start chopping down the tree, Admiral. We'll have the bloody old cave to ourselves now."

As Bonilla and Duke Hollister stood watching Cap'n Jolly begin the task of felling the cottonwood tree to form a bridge across the expanse of lethal sands, Bonilla was more and more overwhelmed by self-guilt. He was as much to blame for Tommy's death as Sixto.

Why had he invited K6ATX along on this treasure hunt? To reward Tommy for saving his life last year at San Miguel Island? Was death a reward? Indeed, Bonilla asked himself for the hundredth time, why had he organized this expedition out of Mexico in the first place? His professional career was running the Museum of the Indies in Seville, not running the rapids of the Grand Canyon! Under the international laws of treasure-trove, anything they might find would be shared by Arizona and Mexico, not by Spain. And as events turned out, the infamous Museum Bandit would wind up in possession of the entire cache anyway, the greatest coup of his nefarious career.

The cottonwood toppled minutes later with a splintering crash. Crossing the hazardous *sumidero* via the tree trunk was a simple matter, even for an oldster like Bonilla. Once on solid ground again, he and Cap'n Jolly were dismayed and offended when Hollister produced the handcuffs he had previously used on Tommy and, drawing his Luger pistol, forced Bonilla to manacle his left wrist to Cap'n Jolly's right. For the first time, Hollister was revealing his true colors.

"I am fully aware that you two blokes do not trust me," Hollister had said. "Nor do I trust you, any farther than I could throw a chimney by the smoke. You might take a fancy to turn on me."

The short scrambling climb up the canyon in the boiling heat of mid-afternoon had proved too strenuous for Bonilla's heart, bringing him to the verge of physical collapse. Impatient to reach the Cave of Skeletons and the fortune he was sure awaited them there, Duke Hollister had ordered Cap'n Jolly to hoist the old man over his shoulder to bodily carry him up the rocky slope.

Bonilla would have begged off accompanying them farther had it not been that Hollister considered his knowledge of the Salazar parchment essential to actually locating the Aztec gold, once they reached the Cave of Skeletons.

For selfish reasons, though Bonilla well knew that Hollister

planned to execute them both as soon as the Aztec treasure was actually uncovered, he did not want to die without at least being in at the actual exhumation of the most important archeological bonanza of the Twentieth Century.

Bonilla lay down to recover his strength at the entrance of the Cave of Skeletons, the handcuffs forcing Cap'n Jolly to kneel at his side. All three men were grateful for the cool shade of the tamarisk hedge which had screened off any view of the cavern mouth.

Above the thumping of his overtaxed heart, Antonio Bonilla heard Duke Hollister addressing Cap'n Jolly: "We'll give Doctor Bonilla ten minutes... When he's rested, you two go ahead with the flashlight and I'll bring up the rear. We're jolly well on the verge of making history!"

Now the great moment was at hand. With Cap'n Jolly's help, Bonilla heaved himself ponderously to his feet. He unzipped his jumpsuit and brought out the Aztec dagger, unplugging the handle to draw out the sheepskin parchment which would give them the final directions for locating Captain Ventura's cache.

"I am ready, Señor." Bonilla panted. "This will be the supreme triumph of my career as an archeologist. It is ironic, but appropriate, that my bones will rest for eternity in such an historic sepulcher as this, joining my martyred countrymen."

With Cap'n Jolly holding their battery-powered lantern, Bonilla carrying the Salazar parchment and Duke Hollister bringing up the rear, the three treasure-hunters groped into the cool, musty cavern. All three were breathing hard from anticipation and overexertion. As they reached the great inner chamber, their voices echoed ghostily off the high-vaulted dome of the rock ceiling.

The back-and-forth sweep of the lantern made the six scattered human skeletons stand out in sharp highlight and shadow. Antonio Bonilla's voice held a keening sound as he said, "There they are, the *conquistadores* whom Ozar the Aztec pursued across southern Utah and into the Grand Canyon of the River of Blood. In this very chamber they fought each other to the death—out of sheer greed."

Cap'n Jolly shifted his lantern's beam to spotlight one skeleton which still had a sword jutting from the breastbone, graphic proof of the outcome of one fencing duel.

"Spookiest place I've ever seen," the *Titanic*'s skipper said in a hoarse whisper. "We should never have come here. Don't forget

this place is under an Aztec curse, Duke, like the parchment said. I can feel it, I can taste it. Let's get out of here while we can."

Hollister's face was rinsed with perspiration in spite of the cool temperature of the cavern. Bonilla could see the superstitious dread showing in the whites of Hollister's eyes, and knew that the Museum Bandit was sharing Cap'n Jolly's contagious apprehension.

"What you feel and taste is your filthy chewing tobacco," Hollister snapped impatiently. "Like Doc says, we've come too far to cancel out now. It'll take more than Aztec curses to keep me away from that cache of Captain Ventura's, Admiral. Come on."

The three men threaded their way gingerly among the skeletons, then came to an abrupt halt when Cap'n Jolly's lantern beam came to rest on a mummified corpse propped in a seated position against a rock ledge. The light gleamed off the Spanish helmet which encased the skull, and off a metal breastplate which bore the coat of arms and name of Juan Ventura de Catalonia.

For the first time in hours, Cap'n Jolly's jaw stopped champing on his tobacco cud. His eyes bulged from their sockets like those of a startled bullfrog.

"*El Capitan Ventura!*" Bonilla gasped in awe, sinking to his knees as if to worship the ossified figure which regarded them through spectral eye sockets. "It is exactly as the Friar wrote!"

Bonilla referred to his ancient parchment. "Friar Salazar, after marking the burial spot of the treasure with his own crucifix, recited the Lord's Prayer and Doxology to sanctify the spot. Then he returned to this chamber to perform the last rites of the church on Capital Ventura and his *soldados*, before leaving the cave. He left Capitan Ventura sitting here, hand on sword, 'to guard the Aztec treasure for eternity... and woe to him who comes—'

"*And woe to him who comes seeking to plunder this holy place!*"

Doc Bonilla had not completed the quotation. The final dozen words had been intoned by a disembodied voice coming from out of nowhere! A voice that reverberated hollowly, like an audio track filtered electronically through an echo box in a sound studio.

"*Who said that?*" Duke Hollister's panicked voice broke the ensuing silence. "Was that you, Doctor?"

Antonio Bonilla broke his trance to shake his head. He lifted a trembling hand, pointing toward the seated mummy of El Capitan Juan Vicente Ventura de Catalonia.

"It sounded to me like—the voice came from...him."

"*The voice is from the spirit of Juan Vicente Ventura, a loyal Capitan in the service of His Catholic Majesty Carlos Quinto... I have been waiting for you, Señores! Come ye with evil intent?*"

All eyes turned in the direction of the steel-helmeted mummy. The spectral voice seemed to fade into the distance, leaving behind an overlapping chorus of echoes, like a lament of lost souls in Hades. Cap'n Jolly was chalk-white. His knees unhinged and dropped him into a kneeling position alongside Bonilla. The old river runner was clutching his stomach and making gagging noises.

"I—I swallered—my chaw of tobaccy!" the skipper retched.

Behind them, Duke Hollister was poised as if to run. Then he forced himself to stride past his kneeling prisoners, aiming his pistol at the mummy with both hands, but still unable to control the palsied tremor which vibrated his extended arms.

"*Put down that puny weapon, fool!*" There was no doubting it now: the hollow-sounding voice issued from the mummy's skull! A tremulous voice that carried a metallic reverberation as if Ventura's ghost was talking into an iron kettle. "*Mere bullets cannot harm the immortal spirit of a conquistador de Espagna!*"

A mewing sound escaped Duke Hollister's throat as he jerked the trigger. A needle of flame spat from the bore of the Luger. The blast of the gunshot was magnified by the roundabout walls of stone, the acoustics seeming to drive the sound waves against their eardrums like nails being hammered into their heads.

Punched squarely through the center of Ventura's breastplate was a round black hole left by Hollister's bullet. The pith-dry mummy was rocked back by the drilling impact of the slug, jolting tiny cascades of talcum-fine dust off the shoulder plates of the armor. From the grinning toothy mouth came what sounded like a burst of demonic laughter.

With a scream of terror, Duke Hollister staggered forward and pumped two more quick shots point-blank into the grinning teeth of the mummy. Doc Bonilla gasped as he saw the helmeted skull knocked loose from the mummy's spine, to drop with a clang onto the stone floor between Captain Ventura's outspread knees.

Hollister recoiled from the decapitated mummy as if the skull was a striking rattlesnake. Before he could give vent to the hysteria building in his throat, the mummy voice challenged him again, this time from

the grounded location of the skull between Captain Ventura's booted legs: "Cowardly fool! You have profaned this sacred place! Prepare to die, Museum Bandit!"

Hollister had endured all the supernatural phenomena he was capable of. His reason seemed to snap as, yowling in total panic, he whirled and started in the direction of the escape tunnel.

"Come on, let's scram out of here, Doc!" wailed Cap'n Jolly, seeming to gag on his own tongue. But as the skipper attempted to regain his feet he was jerked back to his knees by the weight of Doc Bonilla's body joined to him by the steel fetters. In so doing Cap'n Jolly dropped the lantern, which fell with its beam pointing toward the cave's exit.

In the following split second, Doc's single eye recorded an amazing event: Hollister stumbled over a skeleton underfoot. At the upper edge of the cone of light, Bonilla saw a blur of movement as a figure launched itself into space from a ledge six feet above.

The diving figure landed on Duke Hollister's shoulders and drove him to the ground. Bonilla shouted joyously: "Tomás! Tomás!"

At the old Spaniard's side, Cap'n Jolly cawed out a strangled oath as he, too, recognized Hollister's aerial attacker. It was the reincarnated ghost of Tommy Rockford. Had not the youth drowned in the *sumidero* an hour ago? In the surreal atmosphere of this cavern, the super-cynical realist in Cap'n Jolly was more than ready to accept anything his eyes told him, supernatural or no.

Locked in frenzied combat, K6ATX and the Museum Bandit rolled over and over, scattering the brittle ribs and vertebrae of any Spanish skeleton that got in the way. Given the advantage of surprise by his dive off the overhead ledge, K6ATX was concentrating his every ounce of strength on getting a lock on the gun in Hollister's right fist and a choke hold around the neck.

The two reared to their feet in a straining grapple, one man inspired by superstitious frenzy, the other by the sure knowledge that in his hands alone lay the lives of them all. Rockford wedged a leg around Hollister's left knee and tripped the outlaw violently to the ground, landing him on his back. The fury of K6ATX's attack overpowered Hollister and he let go the Luger to claw desperately at Tommy's strangle hold.

"Doc—get the gun!"

Even before Tommy barked the order, Doc Bonilla, dragging a

very nauseated Cap'n Jolly behind him, leaped over to snatch up the Museum Bandit's pistol.

As Tommy straddled Hollister's chest, Doc Bonilla pounced on his mortal enemy with a shout of triumph.

"I should kill you, Duke!" the old Spaniard hissed. "But I can wait for my revenge—" So saying, Bonilla clipped Hollister across the brow with the Luger barrel with a crack of sound like a bat hitting a baseball.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Amateur Radio Magic

It was all over, less than ten seconds after it had begun. Dazed by the blow to his skull, Hollister wilted, blood from a flesh wound threading in crimson streams across his brow and cheek.

"The key to these handcuffs is in this pocket, Tomás!" Bonilla cried. Cap'n Jolly knelt beside him, rocking back and forth clutching his stomach, his face taking on a greenish pallor.

Tommy Rockford rummaged in the unconscious man's pants pocket and came up with the key to the handcuffs. The teenager from Santa Bonita was grinning for the first time since their Grand Canyon adventure had begun, as he reached over to unlock the iron shackles to free his two companions. Then he rolled the dazed Museum Bandit over on his face and manacled his wrists behind his back.

Even as K6ATX got to his feet, Doc Bonilla raised up to embrace him, tears wetting his seamed cheeks.

"Again I had mourned you for dead, *hijo mio*. When I saw your baseball cap lying on the quicksand it broke my heart—"

K6ATX chuckled, "That's my lucky Dodger cap, Doc. I intend to get it back, if it's still afloat."

As the old Spaniard released Tommy from his bear hug, Cap'n Jolly moved over to pump his hand in an ecstasy of thanksgiving.

"What I want to know," the skipper of the *Titanic* wheezed, "is how in blazes you got your fossilized friend to scare Hollister into skedaddling? Are you a ventriloquist or something? An amateur magician, maybe, throwing your voice? Because I still don't believe in ghosts, even if I just heard one talking."

Tommy Rockford laughed. "I'm not a ventriloquist and I'm not

an amateur magician," he confessed, "Unless you mean an amateur *radio* magician. You see, when I found myself trapped prematurely, all I had going for me was my knowledge that Duke Hollister is an extremely superstitious man. Remember how he and his brother entered a life of crime because a ghost in their Torquay manorhouse urged them to? I thought, if the Duke listened to ghost voices then, maybe he'll listen to one now. That was all I needed, it turned out. Hollister's greed and his superstitious nature combined to overcome him, I guess."

Bonilla snorted disdainfully. "Hollister may have graduated from Balliol College at Oxford, but he's a stupid ignoramus. Relying on astrologers and fortune-tellers and all that pseudoscientific rot. But Tomás—how in the name of all that's holy did you make Ventura's skull talk to us?"

K6ATX laughed. "A little Amateur Radio magic. I'll show you."

Tommy walked over to pick up Captain Ventura's bullet-riddled skull. Bringing it over to the circle of lantern light, he held the mummified head by the jawbone and turned it upside down so they could inspect the rear of the Spanish helmet. Jutting through a rusted-out hole in the rusty metal headgear along with the protruding ponytail of black hair was something that appeared to be an imbedded arrow with a broken-off black shaft tipped with chromium.

"I think EA7WK here will recognize what kind of arrow is sticking out of Captain Ventura's helmet," Tommy chuckled. "Look familiar to you, old friend?"

Bonilla reached out to touch the protruding black shaft with a finger. The shaft was flexible, vibrating as Doc released it.

"A flex antenna for a handy-talkie! What you Anglos call a 'rubber ducky'!"

"Bingo—you've got it, Doc!"

Very gently, Tommy Rockford lifted the helmet off the skull. Lying atop the Captain's black-haired scalp was Ellwood Sixto's CB transceiver. With the power switch left in the ON position, the radio was automatically in receiving mode, the audio gain turned to maximum volume. To prevent feedback from the transmitting unit being so close to the receiver, Tommy had been careful to turn the receiver speaker away from the transmitting unit.

Cap'n Jolly, getting sicker by the minute, was shaking his head in baffled frustration as he saw Tommy again conceal the CB radio

inside the helmet, making sure the flexible rubber-ducky projected through the rusted hole in the rear.

Carefully restoring the skull back between the shoulders of the mummy, Tommy Rockford walked over to the rock wall of the chamber, reached up to the ledge where he had lain in hiding, and produced a second CB transceiver—the one that had been issued to the late Tony Slade.

Lifting Slade's unit to his mouth, Tommy spoke softly—but his amplified words issued from the helmeted skull of the long-dead Spanish officer twenty feet away: "I crawled up on the ledge just as you people were entering the cave," K6ATX's spectral voice explained. "Lying down so I couldn't be spotted as you came in. When the proper moment came, I started transmitting, letting the speaker inside the helmet do its thing, knowing it was likely that Hollister would break and run for it—and give me the chance to jump down on top of him. The scheme worked. Call it 'magic' if you will, but it worked. An added bonus—because the receiver was transmitting from inside Ventura's hard hat, it put that weird hollow echo sound on the audio. It was spooky enough to send the duck-bumps down *my* spine as well, let alone a fanatic believer in the occult like Duke. We'll explain it to him when he wakes up."

Cap'n Jolly reached toward Hollister's pistol, which Tommy had stuffed under the waistband of his jeans.

"Hand me that gun," Cap'n Jolly panted, "and I'll blow Duke's brains out for you. That's what he would have done to Doc an' me if you hadn't showed up. Leave his bones here with the rest of 'em."

Tommy shook his head. "No, Cap'n. That Aztec curse has already cost enough lives. Castor and Pollux. Sixto. Slade. No, we'll return the Museum Bandit to Europe to stand trial. The courts will sentence Hollister to the gallows. Do you agree, Doc?"

The venerable archeologist nodded emphatic agreement. "Si. Although I confess I was sorely tempted to pull that trigger just now instead of pistol-whipping Hollister into submission. But my testimony alone will be more than enough to get him executed. Both Interpol and Scotland Yard already hold murder warrants for Duke Hollister. Yes, we'll let a court of law avenge us, Capitan."

Tommy Rockford turned to face EA7WK. "The parchment says the treasure is at the far end of this cavern, behind Ventura's mummy?"

I imagine you're getting impatient to walk back there—”

Bonilla nodded. “*Verdad*. The *conquistadores* buried the saddlebags, but they did not dig a hole first. They lay the bags of gold on the floor of the cave and covered them with a mound of loose sand. And Friar Salazar marked the spot with the crucifix off his rosary.”

Cap’n Jolly, his swallowed tobacco temporarily forgotten, said excitedly, starting forward, “Then what are we waiting for? Like them Olympic Games runners used to say, let’s go for the gold, eh?”

Antonio Bonilla pulled him back. “No, Señor Capitan. That final honor must go to Tomás here. We cannot relax our guard over Duke Hollister. He is still capable of using his legs to escape. He could get back to our camp on foot during the time we would take digging out the treasure, and once there, he could force Whitey Rosegart to saw off his irons and the two of them could escape down to Lake Mead in the *Titanic*. ”

Tommy Rockford walked back to the rock wall, reached up to the low ledge and retrieved Sixto’s lantern. Suddenly a cry from behind them made all three men whirl about, in time to see Duke Hollister propping himself up on one elbow, shaking his head dazedly.

Eyes blazing with anger and hatred, the Museum Bandit turned to Tommy Rockford and snarled, “So it was you who did me in, Tommy Rockford! Why I didn’t send you to the bottom of the river along with those two Indians at Havasu Creek I will never know. I thought you would be a good hostage to throw in Bonilla’s face. But there was nothing you could have done that I couldn’t have accomplished with a red hot iron in that Cyclopean eye of his.”

Hollister sank back, utterly spent by heat exhaustion and maniacal fury at the realization of his defeat. Tommy said gravely, “Doc, I want you to come along with me and share the big moment—”

Bonilla gave Tommy another fatherly hug. “*Muchas gracias*, my son, but only you deserve the honor of locating that gold. When you have found it, notify us by radio. We will be listening to the set inside Capitan Ventura’s helmet. Only when I receive the glorious news will I come to join you. Now *vamose!* *Andale!* And go with God!”

The adrenalin was pumping again in Tommy’s veins as, carrying his radio and the lantern, he climbed over the ledge where Captain Ventura’s mummy sat on guard. He heard Bonilla telling Cap’n Jolly, “We must make sure Capitan Ventura is given decent Christian burial

before we leave the Grand Canyon. He performed his tour of guard duty well and faithfully."

Tommy Rockford plodded his way over the miniature sand dunes which carpeted the rear tunnel of the Cave of Skeletons. The light of Bonilla's lantern disappeared as Tommy rounded a bend in the cave and sent his own shaft of light probing the darkness ahead.

He was nearing the dead end of the grotto, his excitement mounting with each passing second. Suddenly he came to a dead halt, facing a blank wall of stone. The light of his lantern illuminated the entire barrier of stone—and etched against that wall, like a silhouette projected onto a movie screen, was a huge Christian cross, black as ink against the light background.

It was the sacred talisman of a religious faith that had endured for two-thousand years. The same *santa cruz* which Juan Vicente Ventura and his Spanish *conquistadores* had venerated on their ill-starred trek in search of the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola. A symbol held equally sacred by a laid-back Presbyterian Protestant like Tommy Rockford and his family.

Then K6ATX realized that the Christian cross was not a pictograph painted on the dead end of the Cave of Skeletons. It had no more substance than a shadow, for that was what it was. When Tommy moved the position of the lantern's beam, the cross waggled accordingly across its sandstone screen.

Then, trudging closer through the piled-up blow sand, K6ATX saw the source of the cruciform shadow, and his heart thrilled.

Butting from a hummock of sand nearest the back wall of the cave was a corroded bronze crucifix, the base of which had been stuck upright into the miniature Golgotha. Tommy Rockford could almost feel the presence of the devout old grayfriar who had knelt to plant this talisman into the sand heap. He had then intoned the Lord's Prayer. Tommy had only to close his eyes to recreate the old monk's voice chanting the Doxology at this exact spot in the remote past:

"Gloria in Excelsis Deo... Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen."

As reverently as a pilgrim at a holy shrine, Tommy Rockford knelt down and placed his lantern to one side. He picked up the crucifix, surprised at the weight of the bronze casting. It was the butt of this

crucifix, Tommy remembered, that Friar Salazar had used as a tool to chisel through the desert varnish on a canyon wall to form a Maltese Cross, which only yesterday had given up its secret of how to unlock a centuries-old Aztec mystery.

With hands that trembled with excitement and jubilation, Tommy Rockford began scooping palmsful of sand away from the spot marked by the bronze cross. He had not dug more than ten inches when his fingers encountered a buried object.

Brushing the sand aside, K6ATX revealed green-tarnished brass buckles holding thick bullhide straps to secure the flap of an Andalusian saddle bag. He removed a few more pounds of sand, enough to confirm that three more *alforja* bags lay alongside the first.

He tugged at the strap of the first bag. It ripped like brittle canvas, the leather rotted by four centuries of interment. Tommy folded back one corner of the torn flap. Raising his lantern to play the light into the opening, Tommy's eyes were dazzled by the radiance of gleaming yellow metal. Aztec jewelry and objects of art fashioned from pure gold, silver, precious stones.

He lifted one piece out for closer examination. It was in the shape of a fish, probably a necklace pendant, each scale fashioned delicately of alternating silver and gold. Doc Bonilla would agree later that this exquisite work by some long-dead Aztec artisan equalled the skill of the best of the European goldsmiths of the Italian Renaissance, contemporaries on two continents separated by thousands of miles of uncharted ocean.

Tommy replaced the unique piece of Aztec art and gently covered the glittering golden horde with the torn flap of bullhide.

It was not his right to open these leather treasure chests. That honor belonged to one man, his ham radio buddy waiting back there beside Captain Ventura. The ancient curse of an Aztec witch doctor had been exorcised by a latter-day descendant of the *conquistadores*. Dr. Antonio Bonilla had been destined to come, not to plunder for profit, but to preserve Ozar the Aztec's sacred heritage for posterity and return it to Mexico, where it belonged.

Feeling as if he had just been through a profoundly religious experience, Tommy Rockford refilled the hole in the sand, smoothed out the surface, and restored Friar Salazar's bronze cross to the exact spot where the old padre had placed it so long ago.

Then, his eyes moist with emotion, Tommy Rockford lifted the

radio unit to his lips and thumbed the transmit button.

"K6ATX calling EA7WK. Read me, Doc?" Surely, he thought, this is the most unusual QSO any radio amateur could ever hope to have. Certainly it was originating from the most unlikely QTH!

Doc Bonilla's excited voice rattled the speaker cone against Tommy's ear: "Roger! As CB slang would put it, K6ATX, your signal is coming in 'wall to wall and treetop tall.' I am afraid Capitan Jolly is, er, having a digestive disturbance at the moment, due to ingesting too much nicotine. FYI, Duke Hollister is wide awake and listening. I'm sure the Museum Bandit is as interested as I am in whatever you are about to report to us, K6ATX. Over."

Tommy Rockford brushed the back of his hand against his moist eyelids. He swallowed hard to get the lump out of his throat. Then he said in a calm voice, "I found everything exactly as your Salazar parchment described it, *amigo*. To quote Cap'n Jolly, 'Come 'n' get it!' K6ATX clear."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Grand Canyon QSO, fifth in the series of Tommy Rockford adventures, was first plotted in 1972 when author Walker A. Tompkins was rafting the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon.

In 1985, when ARRL requested another in the series which includes *SOS at Midnight*, *CQ Ghost Ship!*, *DX Brings Danger* and *Death Valley QTH*, Tompkins decided to take his ham radio hero into the Grand Canyon. But in order to refresh his thirteen-year-old memories of that incomparable gorge, the author ran the rapids again—this time with his XYL, Barbara and first harmonic, Reid.

The result is the book you now hold in your hand.

In his home town of Santa Barbara, Mr. Tompkins is best known for his twice-daily radio vignettes on local history, and as the author of fifty-seven books, seventeen of them dealing with the history and people of the Santa Barbara area.

He has been a licensed radio ham since 1952, when he passed his Novice test at the FCC office in Los Angeles, and was assigned the call which his fictional alter ego has made famous—K6ATX. Three years later he was elected President of the Santa Barbara Amateur Radio Club, where he originated the club magazine *Key Klix*, now in its thirty-first year of publication. He has also written about ham radio for *National Geographic*, *Parents*, *Popular Mechanics*, *QST* and *CQ*.

During his writing career K6ATX has traveled extensively in all parts of the world. During World War II he served for three years as a war correspondent in the European Theater. He has a son, two daughters and two grandsons—whom he hopes will take up Amateur Radio as a hobby when they are old enough!

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Tommy Rockford, K6ATX is back on the trail of high adventure! *Grand Canyon QSO* is the latest of Walker Tompkins' exciting classics. Newcomers and oldtimers alike find it impossible to put these books down. They are written in a style that will spark an interest in Amateur Radio among unlicensed persons as well.

SOS at Midnight finds Tommy up against the Purple Shirt Mob and ham radio saves the day! The beachcomber seemed like a harmless character, but what did he have to hide in *CQ Ghost Ship*? Underwater adventure and ham radio join together to form the exciting conclusion to *DX Brings Danger*. In *Death Valley QTH*, what starts out to be a typical Field Day operation becomes a matter of life and death for K6ATX and the members of the Santa Bonita Amateur Radio Club.

The author, who is K6ATX in real life, is an accomplished television screenwriter, newspaper columnist, historian and biographer. His intimate knowledge of the areas where these stories take place makes them even more true-to-life. You'll want to read all five of these classics in Amateur Radio fiction!

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